

THE PERCEPTIONS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS REGARDING
THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF SERVICE LEARNING EDUCATION

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my husband and family. First to my loving husband, Carl Arellano, who encouraged and supported me through this journey. He gave me support when I got frustrated; he kept me calm when I was stressed; and he believed in me like no other to achieve my goal. For so many years he told me to go back to school and I did not think I had it in me; he knew I did. He took charge when needed as I worked long hours on this thesis; all the little things he did in our household did not go unnoticed. Thank you and never forget I love you very much.

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ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to determine the perceptions of middle school students regarding the contributions of service learning education. A survey with eleven statements regarding the contributions of the PLUS/Leadership program (service learning education) to school climate and academic achievement was conducted at two K-8 elementary Central Valley schools. Fifty-four middle school students participated in the survey during the week of Jan 25, 2015, after having been enrolled in a service learning class for two quarters. All surveys were collected and analyzed using the Chi Square Goodness of Fit and descriptive techniques. There was a significant difference in the distribution of responses for 10 of the 11 survey statements. The majority of students either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their attitude about: feeling connected or a bond with the school, other students, teachers, and staff; school pride; and feeling safe at school. The survey also concluded that the majority of students either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their ability to study, think creatively, think critically, discuss ideas, work independently, and work in groups.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There have been efforts by educators to build a positive climate and improve student engagement within schools with little or no success. With the recent implementation of the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), the urgency to improve school climate, student achievement, and student engagement has risen. These are 3 out of the 8 focus areas of LCAP for which school districts are receiving funding. Research to identify effective programs in these three areas may serve a useful purpose.

Service learning education through the Peer Leaders Uniting Students (PLUS) program was selected by some California Central Valley schools to address school climate, student engagement, and student achievement. The goal is for students to feel connected, to feel a bond or attachment to their school. Feeling connected or having a bond with the school is important to keep students motivated to perform well academically as they enter middle school. Making the transition from elementary to middle school as smooth as possible without negative outcomes is a priority. Having middle school students feel the same sense of connection and bond with the school as they did in the elementary grades is a challenging task. Using service learning programs is a starting point for some Central Valley schools. Long stated, “When it comes to the development of school climate and student engagement, the PLUS program is on the frontline as a systematic approach for schools to gather

data and build true connection for all students” (PLUS, n.d., para. 1). Some Central Valley schools are using this program with a leadership component to try and build student engagement, positive school climate, a sense of community outreach, and improve student achievement. The program is used by some Central Valley schools to build pride and help students become connected to their school. Service learning engages young people in service to their communities as a means of enriching their academic learning, promoting personal growth, and helping them develop the skills needed for productive citizenship (Hope, 1999). The service learning component includes having students participate in community service events such as clothing and food drives, campus beautification, and spirit days.

Statement of the Problem

There is a decline in motivation to do well in school that already exists which tends to increase as students get into middle school where adolescents confront new challenges both social and academic (Wang, Selman, Dishion, & Stormschak, 2005). Students entering middle school struggle adjusting to the new environment and school climate. They not only have problems adjusting academically but socially as well. Wang et al. (2010) found that the proportion of students who perceive their school as having a positive school climate decline over the middle school years for both genders, while the level of problem behavior increases. Many middle school students tend to have difficulty adjusting and demonstrating a connection with their school and consequently show signs of negative behavior. According to Wang et al.,

The incident and frequency of adolescent problem behaviors are a major concern because adolescents who manifest problem behaviors are also more likely to exhibit negative educational outcomes (i.e., low grades and peer rejection) which often lead to academic failure. (Gutman, Sameroff, and Cole, 2003 p. 274)

Research Question

What are the perceptions of middle school students regarding the contributions of service learning programs?

Null Hypothesis

There is no significant difference in the distribution of survey responses among middle school students regarding their perceived contributions of service learning programs.

Significance of the Study

Students' perceptions of service learning education through the PLUS/Leadership program may determine if the program contributed in promoting student engagement and connection to their school. This study may provide results that are useful to educators who are pursuing ways to increase student motivation to improve academically, bond with the school, and view school as a positive experience.

Also this research may benefit a wide range of audiences. Survey data of the impact on student learning may reveal that those who participate in service learning gain content knowledge, professional knowledge, personal development, and a sense

of civic responsibility (Ruppert, 2013). This study may provide new information regarding service learning which will be useful to administrators, teachers, board members, parents, and students.

Limitations

Students who participated in this study are from different parts of a Central Valley city located in California. The study was conducted at two Central Valley K-8 schools that each offers one period of PLUS/Leadership daily. This study is limited to 54 participating students who are performing at different academic levels. The course is offered 50 minutes a day, 5 days a week, for one semester. Researcher was also the advisor for one of the schools using this program.

Delimitations

The gender, ethnicity, age, and social economic status of the students were not taken into account when conducting this study.

Definitions

The definitions of the following terms have been provided to help the reader have a clear understanding of this study:

Leadership. A service learning program in conjunction with the PLUS program that encourages students to be involved in community service and leadership building, all to improve academic achievement.

Peer Leaders Uniting Students-PLUS Program. A program with the goal of improving a school's climate, student peer to peer connection, and student to teacher connection (PLUS, n.d.).

Summary

Chapter I reviewed the need to improve student engagement, school climate, and student academic achievement. Service Learning education may help students feel a connection to their school, and may help motivate them to improve academically. This study about student perceptions of service learning may benefit stakeholders from students to board members. Chapter II will provide a review of the literature pertinent to the topic of this study

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions of middle school students regarding the contributions of service learning education. The idea of service learning education has been around since 1889, when Jane Addams, a social activist helped establish the “Hull House” in Chicago, IL. This project was inspired by the movement for the expansion of the role of women in public life (Daynes & Longo, 2004). There was a belief that working with the community could benefit those involved. Jane Addams (as cited by Daynes & Longo, 2004) wrote,

If we admit that in education it is necessary to begin with experiences which the child already has and to use his spontaneous and social activity, then the city streets begin this education for him in a more natural way than does the school. (pp 7-8)

She wanted to motivate young minds to have the spark and the framework needed to think critically about social justice and social actions in the wider world (Griffith, 2009). This applies to today’s goals of educating the whole child and exposing students to the real world through service learning.

In the 1920s, there was an idea that character building would create a successful student who in turn would become a productive citizen. Researchers then and now believe that character is a learned trait; therefore it can be taught through character building curriculum. Educators and researchers alike believed that through

social studies and physical education, character building could be enhanced. In physical education, students are taught fair play and sportsmanship, while in social studies they learn about positive role models and great leaders. The current issue of violence in schools and character education programs as its “antidote” is not new; it dates back to the 1920s, while character development as a national ideal can be traced back to Thomas Jefferson (Riley & Brown, 2001).

Service learning has been thought of as a way to improve education and its roots can be found in the philosophy of John Dewey (Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, Donahue, & Weimholt, 2008). Skinner and Chapman (1999) reported, “John Dewey, an advocate of service learning, believed that students would become better citizens if they participated in serving their community” (p. 3). Lee et al. (2008) wrote, “Dewey promoted a connection between daily life and learning (Kunin, 1997) and perceived communities as an integral part of the educational experience (Waterman, 1997)” (p. 272).

Volunteer service of all citizens in the United States was a focal point of the “Thousand Points of Light” a 1989 initiative of President George Bush. In 1990, President George Bush signed a bill that funded the National and Community Service Act (NCSA, 1990) that provided service learning education for grades K-12. In 1993, President Bill Clinton signed into law The National and Community Service Trust Act (NCSTA, 1993) that provided state education agencies funding for service learning through Learn and Serve America. Once the funds became available,

individual states could apply for grants to help develop service learning programs at schools (Miller & Neese, 1997).

For many years, clubs that focus around service learning have been established in schools to promote academic achievement and leadership qualities of students. There are numerous clubs that provide service learning education to students. Currently, the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) encourages districts to allocate funds for schools to design curriculum that will improve student achievement and improve school climate. The LCAP has eight funded priorities that must be addressed that started with the 2013-2014 school year. All are designed to improve schools but there are three priorities that deal directly with student achievement and school climate: Priority 4 (pupil achievement) that measures student success academically; Priority 5 (pupil engagement) that measures student attendance and dropout rates; and Priority 6 (school climate) that measures students' perception of school connectedness and safety (California School Boards Association, 2013). These state mandated and funded priorities have encouraged some central valley schools to promote service learning education. Local districts are now given the freedom to use their budgets for programs and services that will promote these priorities.

Model Service Learning Programs

Service learning education is offered in a variety of modes that involve athletic organizations, honors programs, and clubs of different ethnicity. Schools can implement a service learning program in different ways such as a school wide

program, a grade level program, or as an individual course of study (Skinner & Chapman, 1999). The goal of these programs is to connect students to their community by building leadership qualities that will advance their academic achievement.

The Key Club (n.d.) is a program that is offered to high school students throughout the United States. The Key Club was formed in 1925 in Sacramento, California with 11 charter members. Albert C. Olney and Frank C. Vincent, who were high school administrators, expanded their club to the high schools. This junior service club was developed to have its members help and serve their schools in any way possible, and to create a better school climate. These members were considered role models at their school. The club originally started as a vocational guidance program but it grew into a complete service organization that offered a social aspect to balance its service activities. Today, Key Club is the oldest and largest service program for high school students in the world with more than 250,000 members in 5,000 clubs in 30 countries. Key Club members assist in carrying out the mission of the club to serve the children of the world. Members of the Key club participate in service activities in their community, such as cleaning up parks, collecting clothing, and organizing food drives (Key Club, n.d.).

The National Honor Society (NHS, n.d.) was established in 1921 with the leadership of Dr. Edward Rynearson, principal of the 5th Avenue High School in Pittsburgh. This organization wanted to recognize outstanding high school students who demonstrated excellence in the areas of scholarship, leadership, service and

character. The club kept these traits in mind for the selection of its members. The club was guided by four purposes: (a) to create enthusiasm for scholarship, (b) to stimulate a desire to render service, (c) to promote leadership, and (d) to develop character. The club encourages members to further develop these traits by active involvement in their school and community. The NHS not only wanted its members to excel in academics but serve as productive citizens of their community. It is estimated that today more than one million students participate in NHS activities. The NHS has chapters in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, many US territories, and Canada. Its members serve the community in many ways such as participating in food and clothing drives, preparing and serving Thanksgiving baskets for the needy, raising funds for education in poor countries, and participating in adopt a child for Christmas (NHS, n.d.).

The concept for the Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA, n.d.) was developed by Dr. Hamden L. Forkner, of Columbia University in 1937. The club has members in middle schools, high schools, and colleges. The club believes that service learning helps its members in the following areas: learning about real world issues, concerns, and needs; match members' strengths with community needs; provide practical experiences in planning and organizing; develop leadership skills; build recognition and goodwill for the chapter; and teach satisfaction of a job well done. The club members are encouraged to participate in events such as fundraisers for non-profit organizations such as the March of Dimes to provide assistance to parents of premature babies. Club members also participate in community service

such as volunteering at homeless shelters. Members are required to log community service volunteer hours given the choice of service. The organization is promoting service learning to students as a means of achieving individual goals and become a successful business person. This organization has 215,000 members in the high school division, 11,000 in the college division, and 3,000 in the professional division. The newest and fastest growing division is the middle school with over 20,000 (FBLA, n.d.).

The National Association of Student Councils (NASC, n.d.) was established in 1931 to help individual student councils at different schools serve a higher purpose by contributing to the school and community. Student Council offers students in middle school and high school the opportunity to be involved in their community and schools. NASC encourages its members to focus on current problems that affect them and to find solutions to those problems. The members serve their communities in many ways such as: buying, preparing and delivering dinners to needy families; conducting sports equipment drives for orphan children; and working with the elderly. This organization encourages all its members to help each other stay positive and promote a healthy lifestyle (NASC, n.d.).

The Peer Leaders Uniting Students (PLUS, n.d.) program is designed with the motto “kids taking care of kids.” The program works with students to help them become connected to the school and its staff. They emphasize the need for better school climate throughout the United States. PLUS was founded by John Vandenburg, a former educator in Los Angeles, California. He saw the need and

challenges that schools encountered in the community and migrated over to the campus. He studied gangs to understand how and why they are powerful and popular. He learned that students joined gangs for a sense of belonging and family. Vandenburg used his research to create the PLUS program that duplicates the connectedness of the gang model in a positive manner where kids are taking care of kids. This program began with 54 schools in Southern California and now it is used nationwide. The program is intended to connect students to students, staff, parents, administrators and members of the community who are all then invited to a PLUS program training. The members conduct forums to help students deal with issues that are of concern on their campus and build relationships with peers. Their goal is to help make every student on their campus feel connected to the school, peers, or staff members (PLUS, n.d.). This program was adopted by many central valley schools including a leadership component within the course. The program has its members participate in community service and leadership activities such as food, toy, and clothing drives, campus beautification, anti-bullying assemblies and forums, peer to peer mentoring, and fundraisers.

Research Studies

In the school year 1994-1995, Irmo Middle School in South Carolina was one of the first schools to develop a service learning program called Campus R using funds available to states through the Learn and Serve American Grant. Miller and Neese (1997) wrote an article titled “Self-Esteem and Reaching Out: Implications for Service Learning” that evaluated the results of a study conducted by the South

Carolina State Department of Education in 1996. Campus R served suburban students from the middle class environment. A total of 1,298 students (50% male, 50% female) participated in service learning activities. Their ages ranged from 10 to 14 years old. The participants met at least once a month and their activities included working with the elderly, campus beautification, peer counseling, and working with underprivileged children. In 1996, the South Carolina Department of Education decided to examine student perceptions of the program. A component of the evaluation was a survey of the students' attitudes about the program. Of the total number of participants, the state required that 40 students from two different classrooms participate in a survey. They answered questions using the terms agree strongly, agree, or disagree. The state evaluators reported the results descriptively in terms of the percentage of students who agreed strongly or agreed.

The student perceptions were as follows: Campus R teaches me about interesting jobs/acquaints me with career opportunities (88%); introduces me to new people and places (97%); makes me feel good about and believe in myself (91%); teaches me new things/helps me acquire new skills, interests, and knowledge (97%); makes me want to volunteer more (88%); helps me understand my community and how it works better (94%); lets me be creative and use my own ideas (94%); helps me understand what I study in class better (74%); teaches me how to work better with my classmates and how to work better in a team (94%); builds school spirit (67%); should be part of all my classes (80%); makes learning more interesting (91%); and

helps me see how what I study in school is connected to my life outside the community (85%) (Miller & Neese, 1997).

The state evaluators also asked the student participants what they liked most about service learning education and their responses included the following: providing hands on experience, working with the community, evaluating the results of the project, promoting cooperation and team work, understanding poverty issues, and teaching task management. The evaluators concluded that this service learning program was one of the most ambitious of the state and that it should serve as a model for other schools. Because the results were positive, they continued to fund the program for another year with the idea that the program would become self sufficient (Miller & Neese, 1997).

Schwartz and Suyemoto (2013) conducted a mixed methods study that investigated the impact of a youth organizing program on its participants, as well as the processes through which program experiences influenced outcomes. The participants, who were members of Youth Force (YF), a Boston based service learning program, chose issues that were relevant to their lives and worked together in a team to make change. The Youth Force included the Youth Leadership Institute (YLI) program that consisted of eight two hour training sessions where the participants learned youth leadership and organizational skills. These trainings were conducted by Core Members (CM), which included eight students who had graduated from the Youth Leadership Institute. The participants were also required to attend at least two activities (e.g., rallies, forums) (Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2013).

Schwartz met repeatedly with the program director to collaborate and design the study. The YF administered surveys at the end of each YLI series. The survey data from four YLI cycles were used for the quantitative component. For the qualitative component, the PI and the program director collaboratively developed areas of inquiry. Schwartz asked all YLI participants to participate in interviews but because of lack of parent consent forms, and other factors, only two participated, Kayla (female) and James (male), between 13-14 years of age, and in eighth or ninth grade respectively.

Participants from this interview stated that YF increased their self-confidence, not only in relation to community organization skills and competencies but also more generally. William stated the following: "I just feel like I'm on task. It makes me feel good about myself." Kayla stated the following: "the YF makes me feel good because it's like something positive that I can do as a teen, and a lot of teens don't have positive things to do." Participants also stated that they were able to transfer their skills and confidence to other areas of their lives like school.

Schwartz and Suyemoto (2013) reported,

Seventy-nine YLI participants took a pre-test survey. Of these participants, 43 completed post-test surveys as well. Participants who completed both pre and posttests included 7 (16% in middle school (grades 7-8), 16 (37%) in early high school (grades 9-10), and 19 (44%) in late high school (grades 11-12), and one teen graduate. Participants who only completed the pre-test

included 9 (11%) in middle school, 37 (47%) in early high school, 31 (39%) in late high school, and two teen graduates. (p. 345)

For the quantitative aspect of the study, a paired *t*-test utilizing pre-test and post-test scores revealed statistically significant improvement among YLI participant competence on the civic action scale, $t(2,38) = 2.72, p = .01$, and marginal improvement on the empowerment scale, $t(2,42) = 1.67, p = .10$. Effect sizes calculated using Cohen's *d*, correcting for dependence between means, indicated a medium effect for competence in civic action (Cohen's $d = .46$) and a small effect for empowerment (Cohen's $d = .26$). No significant differences between pre and posttest scores on measures of participatory citizenship or self-efficacy were found.

All core members in the data collection year participated in the interview process. Core members included eight participants, ages 15-17 years, in the 10th-12th grades. Of the core members, five had participated in the program for at least one year at the time of the first interview and three had joined in the previous 2 months. All CMs were YLI graduates with the exception of one who joined the YF before YLI's existence.

The results of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using EVivo software. The interviews were then coded and the results were used for the qualitative aspect of this study. The results showed that students who participated in YF showed an increase in self confidence, not only in relation to community organizational skills and competency but in general skills as well. Participants were able to transfer the skills learned in YF to other contexts of their lives, with a major

one being school (Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2013). This service learning program showed positive results in personal and academic growth amongst students who completed the training. The student perceptions of service indicated that the program helped them become better citizens and better students (Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2013).

The Civic Leadership Institute (CLI) is a 3-week residential program created to help academically talented students explore complex social issues encountered in communities and society. The CLI (2003-2004) conducted a study that posed the following questions: 1) What are the essential characteristics and components of the CLI program? 2) What are students' perceptions of the program and what aspects of the program do they find most valuable? and 3) What benefits or effects do students perceive of the program? (Lee et al., 2008).

The study was conducted with high school students ($N = 230$) from two different sites. Center for Talent Development (CTD) at Northwestern University in Chicago ($n = 84$; $n(2003) = 41$; $n(2004) = 43$) and the Center for Talented Youth (CTY) at John Hopkins University in Baltimore ($n = 146$; $n(2003) = 69$; $n(2004) = 77$).

Surveys were given to students at each site on the last day of their 3-week session during the summers of 2003 and 2004. The CTY survey contained 28 items examining students' ratings of the course material (e.g., readings, written assignments, level of challenge, overall satisfaction), instructor and teaching assistant (e.g., knowledge, organization, availability, feedback, fairness, overall effectiveness),

and academic program components (e.g., field experience, integrative seminar, evening colloquia, final project). All items involved the use of a five point Likert scale 1 = *strongly disagree* (poor) and 5 = *strongly agree* (excellent). Five additional open ended items asked for students' comments on their experience with the academic program and staff.

The CTD survey consisted of 26 items examining students' ratings of the course material, instructor and teaching assistant, and academic program components, as well as the residential staff and residential program. All items used a 5-point rating scale (1 = *disagree* to 5 = *agree*). Ten additional open-ended items requested students' comments on their experiences with the academic and residential programs and staff.

Responses for forced choice items relating to academic program components only and excluding items about the staff and residential program components were analyzed using SPSS 13.0. Descriptive statistics were computed for means and percentages. Open-ended items from students' narrative descriptions about their experiences were analyzed using the constant comparative method of data analysis involving three coding procedures: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Lee et al., 2008).

The findings for the survey were reported descriptively as follows: In 2004 the CLI students at CTD ($M = 4.07$) and CTY ($M = 4.06$) were satisfied with their academic experiences in the program. At least 70% of the students from both sites reported that each component of the CLI program was either good or excellent for

their academic enrichment. Specifically, students rated their field experience (CTD = 4.35, CTY = 4.68) the highest compared to other program components. Results for 2003 reflected those for 2004 with students satisfied with their academic experience with the program (CTD = 4.12, CTY = 4.22) at a level compared to 2004. Similar to 2004, students gave the highest rating to their field experiences (CTD = 4.70, CTY = 4.39) compared to other components of the program showing that service learning education was successful in this study.

When it came to scoring the field experience itself in 2004, all but one student at CTY (who responded satisfactory) and almost 90% of students at CTD rated their field experience as good or excellent. The results of 2003 mirrored those of 2004, with the vast majority of students at both sites (CTD = 92.5%, CTY = 89.3%) rating their field experience as either good or excellent. The majority (80.9%) of the participants reported that their interest in service learning and civic issues increased after their participation in the program, and about two thirds (67.6%) of them acknowledged that the sessions were challenging for them.

The results for the open ended comments made by all participants at both the CTD and CTY sites in 2003 and 2004 were combined, counted, and placed into general categories, skills and ideas they learned or gained through participation in the program. A total of 425 student comments were analyzed, and four main categories (civic awareness or interest, civic engagement, different perceptions about other people, and leadership) emerged from the data. In summary, the findings demonstrated students' positive experiences with the CLI program and the positive

effects of the program on their knowledge skills in areas relevant to civic engagement. Many students indicated their enthusiasm for activities that combined class work with hands-on experiences, including service learning projects. Overall students indicated positive perceptions of the CLI program that increased their awareness of civic issues, motivated them to engage in social issues in their community, and allowed them to gain a new understanding and respect for diversity (Lee et al., 2008).

Carlisle (2011) conducted a study with the purpose of encouraging middle school students to demonstrate healthy relationship attributes with both their peers and teachers. Carlisle stated that the problem in question was that many middle school students did not demonstrate positive behaviors that would lead to stronger relationships with their peers and teachers. The intended solution was to have 60 students in Grade 8 participate in a service learning program that included classroom activities to build healthy relationships with a strong focus on building a positive classroom community, and the introduction of a community service project at their school. The goal of the study was to have the majority of the middle school students demonstrate the positive attributes needed to engage in healthy relationships with their peers and teachers. In order to analyze and reflect on the impact of their community service learning projects, the students kept a reflective journal. At the end of the project, Carlisle held a fishbowl discussion where students shared their reflections from their journals outlining their challenges and rewards of providing community service within the school.

The instruments and methods used to measure outcomes were the use of: (a) Ministry of Education social responsibility standards; (b) office discipline referrals that were calculated for all teachers, and (c) a survey to measure the student beliefs about healthy relationships within the school. The information was collected in September 2009 (preservice learning program) and December 2009 (post service learning program). For the first outcome (Ministry of Education standards) a descriptive analysis showed that the percentage of students not meeting expectations for social responsibility decreased from 25% (15 of 60) in September to 13.6% (8 of 59) in December. For the second outcome a descriptive analysis of office referrals showed that: (a) the percentage of students referred to the office for bullying decreased from 8% in September and October to 5% in November and December; (b) the percentage of students referred to the office for defiance decreased from 33% in September and October to 19% in November and December; and (c) the percentage of students referred to the office for mistreatment of others (peer) decreased from 46% in September and October to 38% in November and December.

A descriptive analysis of the survey results showed that 83% of the students strongly agreed or agreed that they had a healthy relationship with their peers at the end of the service learning project, an increase of 10% before the project. Ninety percent of the students strongly agreed or agreed that they had a healthy relationship with their teachers at the end of the program, an increase of 7%. Sixty-eight percent of the students felt that their community service learning projects helped them build and maintain healthy relationships and 32% felt that it was their classroom mini-

lessons and reflections on conflict resolution that helped them build and maintain healthy relationships. Overall the service learning program showed a positive outcome in all five areas of focus (Carlisle, 2011).

Lemus, Bishop, and Walters (2010) conducted a mixed methods study to determine whether the QuickScience Challenge was meeting its goals to develop leadership abilities, motivate interest in ocean sciences, engage students in community service, and foster student ownership of their education. QuickScience Challenge is a program that combines a cooperative team project emphasizing community service with an academic science competition. Lemus et al. (2010) conducted a formal evaluation of the program to determine if it was meeting its goals. The evaluators also examined student benefits from the perspective of the whole person. Twenty-three middle and high school students from Southern California participated in the QuickScience Challenge in 2005-2006. Methods used to evaluate the program were an online survey (23 students participated) that included 33 selected and open ended responses and student interviews (13 students participated). The data were coded for recurring themes around the overall goals and objectives of the QuickScience program. The evaluators also used two concept mapping software programs (Mindjet Mindmanager 6 & Atlas.ti 5.0) in order to analyze the interview data (Lemus et al., 2010).

The findings of the survey were in response to the question, Did QuickScience increase student interest? The results were reported descriptively: (a) science (48% agreed & 17% strongly agreed), (b) the environment (48% agreed & 52% strongly

agreed, (c) the ocean (39% agreed & 57% strongly agreed), and (d) my community (57% agreed & 39% strongly agreed). The open ended question was: What were the greatest benefits from participating in the program. The responses were: (a) knowledge of learning (12 responses); (b) community service (7 responses); (c) peer interaction (4 responses); (d) teaching (3 responses); and (e) prizes (3 responses). Findings from the interviews (13 participants) include the following opinions: learned communication skills (1), learned about research (1), felt proud helping others (1), worked with younger students (1), shared knowledge with the community (2), developed motivated career interest (2), developed stewardship (2), increased knowledge in science (7), and increased community awareness (13).

Overall, the respondents indicated that they enjoyed working as part of a team more than working alone and most of them (81%) noted that working in groups enhanced their learning more than working by themselves. The social pressures of group accountability, as well as the energy and excitement from group interaction, and enhanced creativity seemed important to these students (Lemus et al., 2010). In summary, the study demonstrated that the design of science lessons and a community service project appeared to provide opportunities for students to exercise leadership skills and engage them with a variety of external constituents (Lemus et al., 2010).

Summary

Chapter two identified model service learning programs and provided the review of literature that is pertinent to this study. Chapter three will provide an

overview of the sample population, instrumentation, methodology, and statistical analysis.

CHAPTER III

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions of middle school students regarding the contributions of service learning education. Research has shown that students who have a more positive perception of school climate have a lower probability of experiencing problems in the future (Wang et al., 2010). Service learning education is a way that many schools are using to improve student engagement and build a positive school climate.

Sample Population

The sample population ($n = 54$) consisted of seventh and eighth grade students from two Central Valley schools. Participants were enrolled in a service learning course (PLUS/Leadership program) for at least one semester (two quarters). The course was offered 50 minutes a day, 5 days a week. Participants of this study completed a survey to share their perceptions regarding the contributions of the program.

Instrumentation

The researcher used a paper survey that analyzed the student perceptions of three statements regarding the quality of relationships between and among students, teachers, and staff, and eight statements regarding the quality of teaching and learning (see Appendix A). Participants were asked to select the response that best described their perceptions regarding each statement using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly*

disagree, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, and 4 = *strongly agree*). This researcher's committee chairperson and selected district administrators reviewed and approved the survey. The survey was submitted to the Stockton Unified School District's Research & Accountability Review Panel for approval, which was granted on December 2014. The survey was also submitted to California State University, Stanislaus Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval, which was granted January 2015.

Methodology

An informed consent letter was sent to the parents of each participant (see Appendix B) that explained the purpose and objective of the study, underscored confidentiality of responses, and requested consent for their children's participation. An informed consent letter was also provided to the participants explaining the objective of the study and that their involvement was voluntary and anonymous; no incentives were offered to take the survey (see Appendix C). Any questions from prospective participants regarding the study and the administration of the survey were directed to this researcher before the survey was administered.

Statistical Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed using the Chi Square Goodness of Fit to determine whether significant differences existed in the distribution of responses to each survey statement. A significance level of $p < .05$ was established for the statistical analysis.

Summary

Chapter III provided an overview of the sample population, instrumentation, methodology, and statistical analysis. The survey consists of three statements regarding the quality of relationships between and among students, teachers, and staff, and eight statements regarding the quality of teaching and learning. This researcher distributed the survey to participants during the month of January 2015 to solicit their perceptions regarding the contributions of the PLUS/Leadership program. Chapter IV will present the findings as they relate to the objective of this study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions of middle school students regarding the contributions of service learning education. Chapter IV presents the analysis of 54 seventh and eighth grade students' responses to a survey. The survey was conducted at two Central Valley schools after the participants were enrolled in a PLUS/Leadership program (service learning class) for two consecutive quarters. This chapter discusses the inferential and descriptive analyzes of the responses to 11 survey statements.

Inferential Analysis

Seventh and eighth grade students were asked to rate their level of agreement regarding the contributions of service learning regarding their attitudes about the school's culture and personal ability to improve academically. Table 1 displays the computed chi-square and probability values. A significant level of $p < .05$ was set for this study. The results produced a significant difference in the distribution of responses for Statement 1 ($\chi^2 = 26.77, p = .001$), Statement 2 ($\chi^2 = 30.29, p = .001$), Statement 3 ($\chi^2 = 28.81, p = .001$), Statement 5 ($\chi^2 = 10.29, p = .016$), Statement 6 ($\chi^2 = 25.11, p = .001$), Statement 7 ($\chi^2 = 25.44, p = .001$), Statement 8 ($\chi^2 = 22.88, p = .001$), Statement 9 ($\chi^2 = 12.00, p = .002$), Statement 10 ($\chi^2 = 18.00, p = .001$), and Statement 11 ($\chi^2 = 44.51, p = .001$). No significant difference existed in the distribution of responses for Statement 4 ($\chi^2 = 7.41, p = .058$).

Table 1

Chi Square and Probability Values: Participation in the PLUS/Leadership

	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Program improved my attitude regarding:		
S1: Feeling connected or a bond with the school, other students, teachers, and staff	26.77	.001*
S2: School pride	30.29	.001*
S3: Feeling safe at school	28.81	.001*
Program has improved my ability to		
S4: Read	7.48	.058
S5: Write	10.29	.016*
S6: Study	25.11	.001*
S7: Think creatively	25.44	.001*
S8: Think critically	22.88	.001*
S9: Discuss ideas	12.00	.002*
S10: Work independently	18.00	.001*
S11: Work in groups	44.51	.001*

* $p < .05$

Descriptive Analysis

Frequencies and percentages were calculated for the various levels of agreement per statement. Table 2 presents a summary of the descriptive analysis. For Statement 1, 96.3% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their attitude regarding feeling connected or a bond with the school, other students, teachers, and staff. For

Statement 2, 87.0% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their attitude with regards to school pride. For Statement 3, 83.3% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their attitude with regards to feeling safe at the school.

For Statement 5, 55.6% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their ability to write. For Statement 6, 74.1% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their ability to study. For Statement 7, 82.0% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their ability to think creatively. For Statement 8, 81.5% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their ability to think critically. For Statement 9, 88.8% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their ability to discuss ideas. For Statement 10, 70.3% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their ability to work independently. Finally, for Statement 11, 90.8% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their ability to work in groups.

Based on the inferential analysis, no significant differences were found in the distribution of responses for Statement 4 (Read). Although, 50% of the participants

agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their ability to read, 50 % of the participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 2

PLUS/Leadership Students' Perceptions Survey Results: Frequencies (Percentages)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
S1: Feeling connected or a bond with the school, other students, teachers, and staff	0 (0.0%)	2 (3.7%)	33 (61.1%)	19 (35.2%)
S2: School pride	2 (3.7%)	5 (9.3%)	25 (46.3%)	22 (40.7%)
S3: Feeling safe at school	1 (1.9%)	8 (14.8%)	27 (50.0%)	18 (33.3%)
S4: Read	8 (14.8%)	19 (35.2%)	18 (33.3%)	9 (16.7%)
S5: Write	5 (9.3%)	19 (35.2%)	19 (35.2%)	11 (20.4%)
S6: Study	1 (1.9%)	13 (24.1%)	27 (50.0%)	13 (24.1%)
S7: Think creatively	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.9%)	23 (42.6%)	30 (55.6%)
S8: Think critically	2 (3.7%)	8 (14.8%)	23 (42.6%)	21 (38.9%)
S9: Discuss ideas	0 (0.0%)	6 (11.1%)	24 (44.4%)	24 (44.4%)
S10: Work independently	2 (3.7%)	14 (25.9%)	24 (44.4%)	14 (25.9%)
S11: Work in groups	1 (1.9%)	4 (7.4%)	17 (31.5%)	32 (59.3%)

Summary

Chapter IV summarized the responses of 54 seventh and eighth grade students from two Central Valley schools who responded to 11 statements regarding their perceptions of the PLUS/Leadership program. This research used a Chi Square Goodness of Fit analysis to determine if any differences existed in the distribution of

responses for each survey statement. The results demonstrated significant difference in the distribution of students' responses for 10 out of the 11 statements (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11). The results did not however find any significant difference for one of the statements (4). Chapter V will include a summary, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further study.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions of middle school students regarding the contributions of service learning education. The Chi Square Goodness of Fit analysis showed a significant difference in the distribution of responses in ten of the eleven survey statements. Chapter V presents a summary of results, conclusions, implications, and provides recommendations for further study.

Summary

The study was conducted to determine the perceptions of middle school students regarding the contributions of service learning education. A survey with eleven statements regarding the benefits of the PLUS/Leadership program (service learning education) regarding school climate and academic achievement was conducted at two K-8 elementary Central Valley schools. Fifty-four middle school students participated in the survey during the week of Jan 25, 2015, after participation in a service learning class for two quarters. All surveys were collected and analyzed using the Chi Square Goodness of Fit and descriptive techniques for analysis.

There was a significant difference in the distribution of responses for 10 of the 11 survey statements. The majority of students either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program was effective in improving their attitudes about: feeling connected or a bond with the school, other students, teachers,

and staff; school pride; and feeling safe at school. The survey also concluded that the majority of students either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved their ability to study, think creatively, think critically, discuss ideas, work independently, and work in groups.

Conclusions

Healthy relationships with peers and teachers can allow students to flourish in all aspects of school life (Carlisle, 2011). The purpose of the PLUS/Leadership program (service learning education) is to help students feel connected to the school and its staff. The majority of the students surveyed agreed on the positive benefits of this program. Service learning education can play an important role in connecting students with other adult role models and giving them a sense of belonging. Tackett (2005) argued, “Kids were not connecting with the adults with whom they came in contact” (p. 10). Service learning education can serve as a tool to make this happen. Many students do not feel valued or listened to by the adults in their lives including teachers and staff at their schools. They do not feel as if they have a role model in their lives. If they do not feel that connection, they may not see themselves as valued members of the community (Tackett, 2005). Through service learning education, students can learn how to work together and build their leadership abilities. Through PLUS/Leadership program (service learning education) students learn how to work together, discuss ideas, and think creatively and critically. Through this program, students can improve their attitude in regards to feeling connected with the school, other students, teachers and staff, school pride, and school safety.

Implications

The data analysis indicated that service learning education students expressed a positive attitude regarding school climate and study habits. Even though the data also indicated that students did not believe service learning education improved their ability to reading, they did however believe that PLUS improved their attitudes towards many other aspects. The participants also believe that service learning education played a large role in improving their attitudes in areas such as: feeling connected or a bond with the school, other students, teachers, and staff; school pride; feeling safe at school; study habits; thinking creatively; thinking critically; ability to discuss ideas; work independently; and working in groups. Research demonstrates that positive student-teacher relationships play a large role on students not engaging in negative behavior in middle school (Wang et al., 2010). The survey results for this study provided little evidence that students who felt connected to their teachers showed improved academic achievement. This study however has provided evidence that service learning education may improve the attitudes of the students when it comes to school climate and study habits, but further study is needed to determine if exposure to service learning over time will improve academic achievement.

With the new Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), school districts are given more authority and freedom to spend their allocated budgets at their discretion. Consequently, more attention has been given to improve school climate and student engagement. Districts are in need of finding effective programs to improve school climate and student engagement.

This study has validated the work of other researchers such as Tackett, Carlisle, Ruppert, Hope, Daynes, and Longo, regarding service learning education being an effective way to improve school climate and student engagement. Perhaps service learning is one approach that can serve a useful purpose in improving school climate, student engagement, and subsequently academic achievement. Evaluation of this program and similar ones should be consistent over a four or five year period to determine consistency of effectiveness..

Recommendations for Further Study

This writer has four recommendations for researchers who are interested in studying the effectiveness of service learning education and its role on improving school climate and student achievement. One recommendation for future research would involve several schools that have implemented the PLUS/Leadership program. Since this program is also used all over the United States, it would be beneficial to conduct a survey in which student perceptions could be analyzed and compared from district to district and state to state.

Second, conduct a survey to compare student attitudes regarding school climate and academic achievement between a group of students who did not participate in service learning education and a group who did. Third, although this study demonstrated that service learning education improved the students' attitudes regarding school climate and study habits, further research is recommended to determine if students who were enrolled in service learning education classes for 3 to 4 years, improved their academic achievement. Finally, this writer recommends a

comparative study between the perceptions of teachers and parents regarding the contributions of service learning education on improving school climate and student achievement.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

PLUS/LEADERSHIP STUDENTS' PERCEPTION SURVEY

Please read the following statements carefully. Circle the response that best describes your opinion. All the responses are completely confidential.

For your reference, school climate = (1) quality of relationships between and among students, teachers, and staff and (2) quality of teaching and learning.

A) Participation in the PLUS/Leadership program improved my attitude regarding:

1. Feeling connected or a bond with the school, other students, teachers, and staff

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

2. School pride

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

3. Feeling safe at the school

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

B) Participation in the PLUS/Leadership program has improved my ability to:

4. Read

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

5. Write

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

6. Study

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

7. Think Creatively

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

8. Think Critically

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

9. Discuss Ideas

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

10. Work Independently

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

11. Work In Groups

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

APPENDIX B

PARENTAL CONSENT LETTER

Dear Parent /Guardian:

During the weeks of January 15-31, 2015, I will ask students who are enrolled in the PLUS/Leadership program to complete a survey. Students will be asked to indicate their perceptions of the effectiveness of the PLUS/Leadership program as it relates to improving their academic achievement and the school climate. The information gathered from the survey will be used for my thesis that I am writing through the Masters of Education in School Administration Program at California State University, Stanislaus. The purpose of this letter is to provide the opportunity for you to excuse your student from participation in this project. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Participation in this survey is voluntary and students may choose not to complete the survey at any time without fear of penalty. There are no known risks associated with taking this survey. Students will not be asked to give their names when taking the survey. The information provided will be protected from inappropriate disclosure. All the information gathered from the survey will be destroyed upon completion of this research project.

If you do not wish to have your student participate in this study, please complete the bottom portion of this letter and have it returned to your student's PLUS/Leadership advisor or to the school's main office (Depending where your child is enrolled). If you have any questions regarding this project, you may contact me at (209) 933-7180, or my committee chairperson, Dr. John Borba, at (209) 667-3260. If you have any questions regarding your student's rights as a participant, call the Campus Compliance Officer at CSU Stanislaus at (209) 667-3747. Thank you in advance for your assistance in this project. Return the bottom portion only if you refuse permission for your student's participation in this research project.

Sincerely,

Isabel Arellano
Graduate Student, Master's Degree Program in School Administration
California State University, Stanislaus

I do not give permission for my student, _____, to complete the survey on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the PLUS/Leadership program. The survey will be conducted by the PLUS/Leadership teacher during that period.

Parent Signature

Date

Carta de Consentimiento de los Padres

Estimado padre/guardian:

Durante las semana de enero 15-31, 2015, les pidire a los estudiantes que están inscritos en el programa PLUS/Liderazgo para completar una encuesta. Los estudiantes deberán indicar sus percepciones de la efectividad de el programa PLUS/Liderazgo que está ligada a la mejora de su rendimiento académico y el clima escolar. La información obtenida en la encuesta se utilizará para mi tesis que estoy escribiendo a través de los maestros de educación en el programa de administración de la escuela en la Universidad Estatal de California, Stanislaus. El propósito de esta carta es proporcionar la oportunidad para que usted pueda excusar su estudiante de participación en este proyecto. La encuesta tomará aproximadamente 15 minutos para completar. La participación en esta encuesta es voluntaria y los estudiantes pueden escoger no completar la encuesta en cualquier momento sin temor de pena. No hay conocidos riesgos asociados con esta encuesta. A los estudiantes no se les pedirá a dar sus nombres cuando se tomen la encuesta. La información proporcionada se protegerán de la divulgación inadecuada. Toda la información obtenida de la encuesta será destruida al finalizar este proyecto de investigación.

Si usted no desea que su estudiante participe en este estudio, por favor complete la parte inferior de esta carta y que se regrese con su estudiante a asesor del programa PLUS/Liderazgo o a la oficina principal de la escuela (dependiendo de donde su hijo está inscrito). Si usted tiene alguna pregunta relacionada con este proyecto, me puede contactar al (209) 933-7180, o mi presidente del Comité, el Dr. John Borba, al (209) 667-3260. Si usted tiene alguna pregunta con respecto a los derechos de su estudiante como participante, llame al Campus Compliance Officer en CSU Stanislaus al (209) 667-3747. Gracias de antemano por su ayuda en este proyecto. Devolver la parte inferior sólo si se niega el permiso para la participación de su hijo en este proyecto de investigación.

Sinceramente,

Isabel Arellano

Estudiante de postgrado, maestría en la escuela de administración de California State University, Stanislaus

No doy permiso para que mi estudiante, _____, complete la encuesta sobre las percepciones de los alumnos de la efectividad de el porgrama PLUS/Liderazgo. La encuesta se llevará a cabo por el profesor de PLUS/Liderazgo durante ese período.

Firma de padres/guardianes

Fecha

APPENDIX C

STUDENT CONSENT LETTER

Dear PLUS/Leadership Student:

I am asking for your help in participating in a survey. The purpose of this survey is to determine your opinion regarding the effectiveness of the Service Learning Programs (PLUS). The information gathered from the survey will be used for my thesis that I am writing through the Masters of Education in School Administration Program at California State University, Stanislaus. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Participation in the survey is voluntary and you may choose to not complete the survey at any time without fear of penalty. If you choose not to complete the survey after you have begun, none of your answers will be included in the final report. There are no known risks associated with taking this survey. You will not be asked to give your name when taking the survey. The information provided will be protected against inappropriate use. All information gathered from the survey will be destroyed upon completion of this research project. By completing the survey, you are giving your permission to include the data in my final report. If you have any questions regarding this project, you may contact me at (209) 933-7180, or my committee chairperson, Dr. John Borba, at (209) 667-3260. If you have any questions regarding your student rights as a participant, you may contact the CSU Stanislaus Campus Compliance Officer at (209) 667-3734. Thank you for your help in contributing to this project.

Sincerely,

Isabel Arellano
 Graduate Student, Master's Degree Program in School Administration
 California State University, Stanislaus

By signing below, I understand that I am voluntarily participating in a survey conducted by Isabel Arellano, master's degree candidate at California State University, Stanislaus. I acknowledge that I have read the above consent letter.

Student Name (Printed)

Student Signature

Date