

SATURDAY SCHOOL: IMPLEMENTING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN AN URBAN SCHOOL

Susan Catapano, Ed.D., *University of North Carolina in Wilmington*

Jenny Gray, Ed.D., *Griffith Elementary, Ferguson-Florissant School District*

Abstract:

Expanding the university-school partnership in one urban district led to the development of a Saturday enrichment program with pre-service teachers planning curricula based on project learning. Researchers asked if this program, a departure from the structured curriculum of Monday through Friday class, had an impact on learners involved. Data were collected through interviews, surveys, and observations from 2005-2010. Overall results indicate that the program had a positive impact on learners and their attitudes about learning. Attendance in the program was high when the curriculum was student-driven. Conflicts in philosophy among administrators had a negative impact on the ongoing success of Saturday School.

“If there has ever been a time to improve schools, the time is now.”

—Scherer, 2010

Introduction

Policymakers, administrators, and teachers are calling for educators to be audacious, do something unique, and make change (Scherer, 2010). The call for change is crucial for schools located in large, urban districts. Most people agree that reform must be made a priority, but there are so many overwhelming challenges facing the families and children who attend urban schools that it is difficult to know where to begin. Urban schools have seen declining performance on state-mandated tests and a revolving door of new teachers who come and go (Catapano & Huisman, 2013) as the challenges, such as lack of books and materials (Farmer-Hinton, Lewis, Patton, & Rivers, 2013), support personnel, and consistent, experienced leadership (Nehring, Lohmeier, & Colombo, 2009), become a harsh reality (Elsasser, 2008). While reform efforts often focus on the traditional pre-K–12 school day, it is also necessary to consider how out-of-school learning can help develop the skills and knowledge students need.

State standardized testing began in 1969 with the National Assessment of Educational Progress test that was given to American students to monitor their educational achievement. In 1994, the Clinton administration started requiring that every state receiving federal money for high-poverty schools (i.e. Title 1 funds) begin testing third through eighth graders annually in math and reading. Under President Bush, states were required to test fourth and eighth graders in math and reading every two years. Tests in subjects like science and writing are optional (U. S. Department of Education, 2015a). Under President Obama, the reauthorization of the Elementary & Secondary School Act continued the mandate for standardized testing as part of the blueprint on accountability and to determine college- and career-ready students (U. S. Department of Education, 2015b). All of the recent legislation has provided additional funding to support schools that are identified as low-performing on state mandated tests. Schools have tried a variety of strategies to help students score higher on tests.

One school, located in a Mid-Western city that is part of a large urban school district, is working to reform the delivery of education through its Saturday School Program. The Program has been offered at the elementary school as part of a university-school partnership since 2005. This study asks children and parents who participated in the program to identify the key aspects of the program that they felt were supportive of their or their child’s success in their regular classroom.

School-University Partnership

Faculty at a large, state-funded, urban university became involved in the Saturday School when looking for an alternative internship and student teaching experience for their early childhood and elementary pre-service teachers. Saturday School was conceived as a way to meet the needs of pre-service teachers who needed to work or had families and could not complete their

one-day-a-week internship without disrupting their lives. The option to complete their 120-hour, school-based internship on a Saturday appealed to many of the university's students. One of the partner elementary schools in the university professional development collaborative was struggling to meet student progress goals and looking for another way to engage their students to increase performance. The principal of the school was open to the idea of Saturday School because it would allow her to meet a goal she had had for many years – a Saturday program that would open the school to students and their parents for an additional day of the week.

Saturday School was intended to be a departure from business as usual. It offered elementary students smaller class sizes that would be team-taught by pre-service teachers and supervised by university faculty. This program used a constructivist, hands-on approach. The basis of the program created an opportunity for faculty to demonstrate knowledge of or facility with project-based learning (PBL) and gave pre-service teachers experience using this strategy when working with young children. Most of the schools in the district use a more direct instruction strategy with a prescribed curriculum. Although university faculty discussed best practices, including inquiry-based and constructivist practice, in the campus classroom, it was almost impossible for pre-service teachers to get first-hand experience with these methods. Saturday School was also based on the state's learning expectations and approved curriculum; however, because the program was delivered on a Saturday, state-mandated testing was not a focal point and district-mandated, scripted curriculum programs were not required. Thus, the Saturday format allowed pre-service teachers to engage students in a more constructivist manner and gave them more autonomy with their subject matter while grounding the instruction in constructivist learning theory (Katz & Chard, 2000). A constructivist approach is based on learning theory that supports learners in developing knowledge for themselves. Each learner uses his or her prior knowledge to construct new understanding, through a cultural lens, and determines meaning for what is being learned. The approach begins with an inquiry, posed by the learner, and the learning unfolds as learner and teacher work together to answer the inquiry (Bruner, 1996). Using this theory, elementary students had the opportunity to pose an inquiry, work together to explore subjects in-depth, and make decisions about their own learning rather than following schedules and lesson plans to meet the benchmarks of curriculum kits.

This program began in 2005 and was studied in 2010. Over 500 children and their families and over 100 pre-service teachers have participated in Saturday School. This program has had a positive impact on the elementary students and their families as measured by surveys and evaluations collected at the end of each session of Saturday School and through interviews with students and families who participated. This study will seek to answer three research questions: (a) What benefits did the program provide to the participants? (b) Did Saturday School help to change the attitudes toward learning for the participants? And (c), how often did children participate in Saturday School? Data was collected through surveys and interviews of students, parents, administrators, university faculty, and pre-service teachers regarding the impact of Saturday School. In addition, documents used in the administration of the program were also reviewed.

Literature Review

Working in Urban Schools

For purposes of this study, the term *urban* in reference to a school is defined as a school located within a greater metropolitan area and, in most cases, approximately 50% of families meet the income requirements to qualify for free or reduced priced lunches (Warshauer-Freedman & Appleman, 2009). In addition, it is critical to note the connotations that the term *urban* brings to mind. Kincheloe, Hayes, Rose, and Anderson (2007) assert that in the United States, use of the term *urban* has become synonymous with poverty, non-whiteness, violence, narcotics, an absence of traditional family values, deteriorating housing, and failing schools. In the urban classroom, teachers struggle with these and many other issues that impact student learning. Policy makers have long sought solutions to the problems facing America's urban schools (Bainbridge, Lasley, & Sundre, 2003).

Today's urban schools tend to serve a large majority of minority students, in low-resourced areas of large, metropolitan cities where many businesses have closed and families who could move to outlying suburban areas have left. This leaves a high concentration of families and children living in poverty to populate urban classrooms. This is what may be considered a unique situation, for which there is no historical precedent (Ravitch & Viteritti, 2000; Glickman & Scally, 2008). Urban schools have unique factors that differentiate them from their suburban and rural counterparts, such as serving students who perform poorly on standardized tests and arrive at school with limited prior school experience or knowledge that makes them "school ready." Urban school students may have parents who are reluctant to become involved in school, come from homes that lack resources, exhibit discipline issues, speak languages other than English as their first language, and may be living in unhealthy conditions (Bridwell, 2012; Sachs, 2004).

On the other hand, the diversity found in many urban schools provides opportunities to create learning environments that enrich instruction by identifying, drawing upon, and creatively using the cultural and linguistic capital students bring to school from their home and community (Sullivan, 2005). Studies have shown that the academic achievement of marginalized students will be enhanced and the education of all students improved if teachers learn to utilize the assets or funds of knowledge children bring with them to school (Banks et al., 2007; Tan & Barton, 2010). As noted by Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez (1992):

Our analysis of funds of knowledge represents a positive (and, we argue, realistic) view of households as containing ample cultural and cognitive resources with great *potential* utility for classroom instruction. (p. 134)

Culturally responsive teaching recognizes that, drawing on their strengths, students learn in different ways, and sometimes there is a mismatch between what is required for success at home and what is required for success at school. The culturally responsive teacher knows this and works to make sure all students can be successful at school (Gay, 2000). Ladson-Billings (2009) reminds readers that effective, culturally responsive teachers view their craft as an art, not a technical skill.

Quality Programming

One of the key challenges of creating out-of-school programs lies in creating programs that have a positive impact. Increasing classroom time alone is not sufficient; however, providing quality, engaging, enriching, and stimulating learning opportunities during out-of-school time helps students transfer skills and knowledge into what is needed for success in the classroom (Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010). Successful out-of-school programs share certain features were previously characteristic of family life, including a strong feeling of membership, a highly personalized approach, and the establishment of clear goals and firm rules (Conn, Calais, Szilagyi, Balkdwin, & Jee, 2014; Heath & McLaughlin, 1991). In successful out-of-school programs the leadership provides a family-like framework in meeting the needs of youth by promoting their growth, establishing a caring community for families and children, and providing a stable environment (Conn, Calais, Szilagyi, Balkdwin, & Jee, 2014; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993).

Although the US Department of Education has funded over 3,600 after school programs in 900 communities (21st Century, 2000), many more programs go unfunded and forgotten (Gingiss, & Boerm, 2009; Lyon, Frazier, Mehta, Atkins, & Weisbach, 2011). In some urban areas the current supply of after school programs for school age children meet as little as 20% of the demand (21st Century, 2000). Experts estimate that the availability of after-school programs cover only about one-third of the population (21st Century, 2000). Hirsch (2005) states that the 40 largest national youth organizations serve approximately 40 million youth, but not all children are equally served. This lack of funding and lack of resources has led some districts to explore other options.

Families rely on after school programs to provide the academic support children need to excel in school. These programs are widely available in wealthier areas, providing children a safe place to be in the afternoon where they can get their homework done or engage in enrichment activities (Neuman, 2010). In low-income urban areas these programs are not readily available and rely on outside funding. When the funding is cut, the program disappears (Afterschool Alliance, 2009; Weiss, Little, Bouffard, Deschienes, & Malone, 2009). Youth in these low-income areas have the greatest need for programming during out-of-school time, yet have the hardest time finding programs that can be sustained (Afterschool Alliance, 2009).

Successful after school programs serve several purposes in urban communities. A study of programs specifically focused on science content learning indicated that the result of the program may or may not increase student performance, but the programs offer access to information and experiences that may not be available without the program (Rahm, Moore, & Martel-Reny, 2005). A summer program that focuses on reading skills notes that the results indicate a greater enthusiasm for reading by the participants as well as higher reading scores on standardized tests when compared to students who did not participate in the program (Manzo, 2008). Finally, in another study, a poorly performing school district collaborated with the local public library to offer homework help after school. This effort resulted in duplicate programs in multiple libraries, and was correlated with improvement in reading comprehension, positive attitudes toward school, and increased self-esteem (Rua, 2008).

Project-Based Learning

Providing enriching academic programming on Saturdays can be a challenge. To motivate students and ensure attendance in such a program, different instructional strategies from what students encounter during the regular school day need to be employed. In the Saturday School Program of this study, Project-based learning was used. This approach finds its roots in constructivism, borrowing from the Reggio Emilia ideals and remembering the basics of John Dewey (Buck Institute for Education, 2002; Mercillott-Hewett, 2001). The focus was on the theoretical framework of child-directed, inquiry-based learning. PBL uses in-depth projects to promote children's intellectual development by engaging their minds in observation and investigation of selected aspects of their experience and environment (Katz & Chard, 2000). Herron, Magomo, and Gossard (2008) maintain PBL can be defined as an individual or group activity that proceeds over a period of time, resulting in a product, presentation, or performance. Newell (2003) describes PBL as emphasizing depth of understanding over content coverage.

Although PBL is "good teaching" for all students, it has long been used with students labeled as gifted and talented as a strategy

to guide learning that allows for creative thinking (Dill, 2009). The focus on low-performance and testing scores in urban schools leaves little time to consider supporting students who are gifted. Hertzog (2007) states:

During the last 20 years, gifted education has promoted pedagogy that connects learning to students' interests, provides opportunities for students to pursue topics and investigations that are meaningful to them, and encourages creative and critical thinking. In sum, gifted education has been the forerunner of curricular reforms that have embraced higher level thinking skills, problem-based learning, and inquiry processes of learning. (p. 530)

In some urban settings, gifted and talented programs have been completely eliminated due to budget constraints (Renzulli & Reis, 2011). Programs that provide rich, deep study of subjects, such as Saturday School, are a needed outlet for gifted students faced with an unchallenging curriculum and irrelevant teaching strategies (Grubb, 2011; Reis, 2011). If left underserved, these students can manifest their creativity by spearheading behavior disruptions. In a study of students from low-income families, Hertzog (2007) found that when PBL was utilized, students were more engaged and therefore better behaved.

Many teachers, parents, and students have found success with the PBL approach to instruction. Students learn better when they are in control of their own learning outcomes (Bradford, 2005). In a study by Yuen (2009), one teacher explained that students became motivated when taking learning into their own hands and using many different skills such as reading, writing, mathematics, science, and interpersonal interactions without realizing it. It was concluded that the experience supported the concept that good project work stimulates the intellectual, social, and problem-solving skills that contribute to the child's capacity to lead a satisfying life (Yuen, 2009). Chard and Flockhart (2002) maintain that rich, in-depth projects offer students a learning environment in which they can develop the reading and writing skills necessary for lifelong, effective citizenship.

Methodology

This study was a qualitative case study of one urban elementary school's Saturday School Program. The use of case study as a methodology is appropriate in this situation as it provided a means to describe the phenomenon of Saturday School and study it in its natural setting (Choemprayong & Wildemuth, 2009). The use of the case study framework also allows for an outward-looking focus on a particular event or program, a "detailed investigation of individual cases and their contexts" (Cohen & Count, 2003, p. 283; Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000). Although ethnography might be another option for this study, such an approach typically focuses on the inward-looking study of an individual or group over an extended period of time (Cohen & Count, 2003). Using a case study framework, Yin (1994) describes a research design as an action plan that takes a researcher from the research questions to the conclusions. It allows the researchers to consider all aspects of the case that is under study rather than focusing on specific variables and ignoring other influences on the case. A single case study plan allowed for deep exploration and evaluation of every component of Saturday School's structure and foundation, leading the researcher to a deeper understanding of Saturday School's impact on the participants.

The study asked three research questions: (a) What benefits did the program provide to the participants? (b) Did Saturday School help change attitudes toward learning for the participants? And (c), how often did children participate in Saturday School? Data was gathered through interviews, observations, and documentation of Saturday School activities. Although the program ran throughout several semesters, the students who participated in the program (and therefore in this study) changed each semester. Some students participated each semester while others did not. The participants were first through fifth graders who took part in Saturday School with regular attendance. Regular attendance in the eight-week program was defined as students attending at least seven or eight sessions out of eight during the semester.

Setting, Participants, Sampling

The pilot of Saturday School began in the fall semester of 2005 at a magnet school in a large, urban, Mid-Western school district. Students were invited to come to school on Saturday and experience a different kind of learning. Undergraduate pre-service teachers from a large state university would teach the classes during their internship course, which is taken the semester before they begin student teaching. The school-based classes consisted of two pre-service teachers collaborating in a team teaching approach with a group of 12-14 first through fifth grade students organized in grade-level groups. From 2005-2008, the Saturday School utilized a project-based learning curriculum integrated communication arts, mathematics, social studies, and science in a structured, scheduled day that lasted approximately five to six hours. The projects focused on the surrounding community, looking for the assets in the urban neighborhood around the school. An example of projects included studying animal habitats after a visit to the zoo and learning about harvesting crops following a study of the local farmer's market. The approach allowed elementary school students to be creative, collaborative, and independent learners in charge of their own progress.

The elementary school was chosen because it was part of a university-school partnership funded through a federal grant. The former principal (principal A) was an active member of the partnership and volunteered her school to participate in the partnership. No other school in this district provided a Saturday School, and no transportation was provided to the students who attended. Parents were responsible for getting their children to school and, in some cases, took multiple public buses each week.

The student participants in this research were all in grades first through fifth with one exception. One student was in sixth grade and she completed four years of the program before moving into middle school. The students' parent or guardian, principal, university faculty, and pre-service teachers who were involved in Saturday School were asked to participate in surveys, interviews, and observations for the purposes of the study. All participants signed consent or assent forms and were informed of the nature and purpose of the study. The participants in the study could also be considered a convenience sample due to the fact that they were those who attended Saturday School and agreed to sign the consent forms. Preliminary data collection began when the program started in the fall of 2005 with attendance records and surveys completed each semester by participating students, families, and university faculty. Additional interviews and observations were conducted during the fall and spring semesters of Saturday School in 2009 and 2010 for the purposes of this evaluation.

It is important to note that there have been two school principals as participants. The original principal (principal A) was a founder and developer of the Saturday School Program. She conceived the idea and collaborated with the university faculty to create the program, with a strong focus on a departure from the instruction that prevailed in the school Monday through Friday. The original philosophy of Saturday School was to utilize PBL in a shorter day that was less formal than the instruction during the school week. A new principal (principal B) began in the fall semester of 2009. She continued Saturday School despite the fact that the original funding source had ended. Principal B was formerly the assistant principal of the school, and therefore had some prior knowledge of the program. She was present every Saturday and supported the program. However, principal B had a different vision for the program. She knew the students enjoyed the program, but believed there could be more rigor in the instruction. In this case, rigor was interpreted as instructional strategies that were used during the Monday-Friday classroom setting. The principal expected to see the same strategies used on Saturday rather than giving students an opportunity to explore, discover, ask questions, and learn through their own construction. The school district had adopted a scripted reading and math curriculum that included very specific ways in which teachers were to present information. The principal asked at one point if the Saturday teachers could just use the curriculum packages that were available, perhaps covering some of the supportive materials. The university faculty and teachers declined to use these materials out of concern that the students may not be as fully engaged in that materials as they were in the projects that emerged from their own inquiries.

Data Collection

Data was collected utilizing interviews, observations, and a review of existing documents. Some data was collected as part of the reporting requirements for the grant and stored in university archives. Students, parents, and faculty were asked to participate in one interview each, for a maximum of one hour. Six students, four parents, and three faculty members agreed to participate and were interviewed. In addition, pre-service teachers and students were observed during Saturday School for one semester, which consisted of nine sessions. Parents were also observed during pick-up and drop-off at each session. The semi-structured interviews were recorded and taped with a digital voice recorder. The wording of questions was flexible, and the level of language had to be adjusted for the age and comprehension level of the participant answering the question. For example, young children (ages 6-7 years) were asked simple, concrete questions and older children (ages 10-12 years) would be asked open-ended, more complex questions or to give more detail when answering. Questions were added and removed, with clarification as needed. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) included essential questions (concerning the main topic of the study), extra questions (similar to the essential to check for accuracy), and probing questions (to draw out a more complete explanation). Interviews with children were developmentally appropriate in terms of time and attention. Parent interviews were longer and more probing in the details surrounding the questions.

The documents reviewed included attendance records for the program and surveys collected from parents at the completion of Saturday School each semester. Observations included classroom activities and projects as well as unstructured time. When observing, Merriam (1998) offers ideas for focus, including the physical setting, the participants, activities and interactions, conversations, subtle factors, and even the researcher's own behavior. A passive observer, not taking part in the action of the setting, but still known to the participants, conducted observations. All of the notes, thoughts, and drawings recorded during these observations were considered field notes.

Data Analysis

In reviewing interview transcripts, classroom observation notes, and participation data, a picture of the phenomenon of Saturday School emerged. The factors that contributed Saturday School's success were identified (Merriam, 1998). As discussed by Merriam (1998), in order to understand the data collected, it was consolidated, reduced, and interpreted. A coding system was

employed in all three sources of data to reveal emerging themes. The emerging themes were further combined to identify seven clear areas of discussion; for example, there was little distinction between the theme of project-based learning and curriculum. Participants used the terms interchangeably so they were combined into one theme. The themes from three data sources were compared for similarity. Interview transcripts and existing documents were compared to field note observations. As themes emerged in the analysis, collected data was revisited. Data collection and analysis happened simultaneously. As the data was refined, patterns and insights directed the analysis and shaped the themes. Themes were reformulated and rethought to follow the direction of the recurring ideas.

The case description in this study included seven themes under data was organized. The themes were: (a) organization and implementation of Saturday School, (b) structure and routine within the School, (c) project-based learning and curriculum, (d) student perspectives and perceived outcomes, (e) parent perspectives and perceived outcomes, (f) faculty and administration perspectives and perceived outcomes, and (g) attendance. The themes were reviewed and data merged to answer the three research questions.

Results

The researcher studied the data collected from Saturday School records, interviews, and observations to answer the following research questions: (a) What benefits did the program provide to the participants? (b) Did Saturday School help to change the attitudes toward learning for the participants? And (c), how often did children participate in Saturday School? Answers to the questions were discovered through observation and interview of participants, and through review of documents gathered as part of Saturday School.

Benefits to Participants

The data to answer the first research question, addressing what benefits the program provided to participants, fell into two areas. These included the opportunity to participate in project-based learning opportunities that engaged participants and opportunities to apply what was learned in Saturday School to the regular classroom.

Project-based learning. The data collected on Project-based learning revealed a variety of terms used when describing the Saturday curriculum. For example, phrases like “projects,” “hands-on,” “small groups,” and “cooperative learning” were seen often. The students interviewed agreed. One stated:

The [pre-service] teachers here always help us and our real teacher, she tries to help us all the time but she can't hear us when, like, a lot of people [are] in the classroom because we have 19 people in the classroom and she can't check all of us, but, we only have like six kids [in Saturday School] and she can do all of them.

Another student noted, “I like how we do things differently, not like regular school. We do fun projects and play games.” A student who struggles daily in school said, “I like to play and this work is like play!”

Parents highlighted the smaller group setting in interviews as well, saying, “They have a smaller group setting...it is more enjoyable from the teacher's standpoint and the student standpoint.” Another parent agreed: “It looks like my kids have more fun at Saturday School...maybe because they have less child[ren].” One pre-service teacher mentioned, “The smaller groups and the one-on-one...they are getting more attention...and we are providing them with these fun activities and therefore they are getting knowledge that school is fun and hopefully that sticks with them.”

Using project-based learning that focused on the surrounding neighborhood, students explored cultural landmarks and discovered community history by taking walking fieldtrips. Students learned about how their neighborhoods were established and the rich history that occurred in their city. Maps drawn on paper bags that had been wetted to look like aged parchment represented their learning. Students also produced skits and presentations that dramatized the early industry of fur trading that took place in neighborhood's open-air market. Place names were investigated and history came alive. These projects and the subsequent documentation were the authentic assessment phase of their learning. In culmination of a PBL lesson, learning was demonstrated with a product, project, or presentation.

This neighborhood exploration also benefited the pre-service teachers. These individuals came to view the city's inner core as a place of pride and history, with many resources to offer its students. Instead of viewing the city as a place of decay, with little value, these educators uncovered a world of positive learning experiences. Pre-service teachers that would not have considered applying for employment in an urban school district began to see themselves as urban educators. One said, “I never envisioned

myself teaching here, but these kids are great!" Principal A also noted, "I was always elated and truly felt very proud when the Saturday school teachers would say to me, 'I really want to teach here!'"

Application to Learning. Another idea that appeared consistently in the student perception category was that of a carry-over of information, the idea that a concept covered in Saturday School was a review or an introduction to a subject covered in class Monday through Friday. A student participant said in interview dated, "When you learn something here, sometimes you learn it in class." Others agreed: "If we learn about a topic, and then we learn about it at school, even if it was Saturday School a few times back, it came back and I remembered it." One student said:

We do math [at school], but I don't get math when I come home because I be frustrated....In Saturday school they help us a lot and that can make my math get better and better. So, when I come home now, I can do math all by myself.

In the projects and curriculum category, a pre-service teacher commented that after implementing a lesson on glaciers, many of the students came back the next Saturday excited that "glacier" had been the "Word of the Week" in their classroom. A parent commented, "Every subject they covered [in Saturday School] does transpose over into what they are learning in the regular class day at some point, and I think they are excited about learning that particular thing." However, not everybody agreed on the transference of the program lessons. Principal B stated, "I guess if I had a wish it would be that the [pre-service] teachers actually reinforce what is happening in the class." Her response was based on her desire for the pre-service teachers to use the district-mandated curriculum during Saturday School rather than project-based learning. During the final session of Saturday School each semester, the participants shared what they had learned by demonstrating their knowledge to parents and the principal. Although it was clear that participants enjoyed the projects and learned from them, Principal B regularly commented that the program would be more meaningful to her if they were tutoring the participants on Saturday in the district curriculum rather than exploring the surrounding neighborhood.

Attitudes Toward Learning

Interviews were completed to answer the question; did Saturday School help change attitudes toward learning for the participants? Such interviews revealed that participants thought Saturday School was more fun than regular school, the program was a better alternative than other Saturday morning options, and there was a carry-over of information involved in the program that allowed students to be more successful Monday through Friday. Fun is a word that was repeated frequently throughout the data, particularly when describing curriculum. Principal A revealed that a student confided in her, "When I come to school, I learn. When I come to Saturday School, I have fun and I learn." A previous university faculty member said, "They don't even realize that they're learning and applying skills because they are having so much fun." A pre-service teacher echoed this idea:

By creating lesson plans where they would have fun, but at the same time learn something from it too...that is probably the hardest thing, trying to put the two together so they can enjoy Saturday School and at the same time learn something.

A student said, "I do a lot of projects. I sometimes even learn when I'm doing fun things and I don't know it." Another student related that she liked Saturday School because, "I like the hands-on because the book work and worksheets...we are really bored so it doesn't really help us learn as much as hands-on where we remember it because it is kind of fun." Another student said, "Most of the time we are doing fun projects, but we are still learning with them." A different student described a day at Saturday School as "shorter [length of day] and more fun." One parent stated, "They are excited when they come home, like, 'Look, I did this!'"

Interview responses revealed that these students also enjoyed Saturday School as an alternative to what they would be doing at home. One student participant claimed that the program kept him "entertained instead of being bored, instead of watching TV." Another cited the same reason: "I don't really have nothing to do at home." One student participant said, "I'm usually excited the whole week to go to Saturday School." Another pre-service teacher agreed with the comments by saying in his interview, "educational activities [were] better than Saturday morning cartoons." This idea was consistent with parents as well. One parent explained, "It gives the kids something else to do instead of just being at home watching TV." A current university faculty member stated in her interview that the elementary students told her if they were at home they would be "just watching TV, playing video games, something like that."

Not all administrators were as impressed with the fun, particularly principal B. "It's fun and the kids have a good time, but with those small numbers, I would expect to see some pretty amazing work and I don't know that I'm seeing that. I guess I don't see the rigor necessarily, at this point." However, as far as curriculum is concerned, a pre-service teacher claimed that the lesson plans "are really cool and educational, not just silly things we're doing. They actually relate to what they're learning about." Principal B felt differently: "They enjoy that and they are learning, but is that directly connected to what is currently happening in

classrooms? I would have to say no.” In an era of school accountability and data, fun is not foremost in the minds of many school administrators. The bottom line becomes test scores and Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), and principal B did not see a strong connection to these measures of success. For this school district, the Terra Nova and state-generated standardized tests were used to determine progress of third graders in the elementary schools. The school consistently had over 75 percent of students scoring below grade level in reading and mathematics. Although some schools report improved performance on standardized tests when using PBL, many of the skills and knowledge acquired through deep exploration of a single topic do not translate to improvement on standardized tests that typically focus on random bits of knowledge applied in a context unfamiliar to students (Thomas, 2000).

Participation in Saturday School

To answer the question regarding how often children participated in Saturday School, attendance records were reviewed. It was noted that the program began in fall 2005 with a clear focus on PBL and revealed high attendance numbers as well as a waiting list. Students were selected on a first come, first-served basis. In the early semesters (2005-2008), there were fewer slots because fewer interns were available. During this time, principal A stated, “For approximately 60 slots we would receive no fewer than almost 200 applications. Families would call, distressed because they did not get their application in on time to get a slot.” She related stories of how students would miss birthday parties or come to Saturday School with a toothache instead of going to a Saturday dentist appointment because they did not want to lose their enrollment slot to someone on the waiting list.

In recent semesters (after 2009), attendance percentages dropped. As administration at the school level and within the university changed, the PBL focus was replaced with lessons that featured small groups and hands-on learning, but was not decided, planned, or developed by the students. Attendance is a crucial indicator of the success of the program. In , with approximately 100 students enrolled in the program, only about 50 students attended each Saturday. University faculty, pre-service teachers, and school administrators all voiced disappointment with the attendance numbers in 2009. One pre-service teacher stated, “The only thing I would like is more kids.”

Discussion

Overall, what began as a federally funded grant to build a school-university partnership that would benefit both entities grew into, among other things, Saturday School. This program continues despite the fact that the original funding source has ended. This study sought to explore critical components of one program in an urban elementary school and to determine how a hands-on, project-based, out-of-school program could impact student participation and influence the attitudes of learners about learning.

One of the most important findings of this study was that elementary students experienced autonomy and creativity in their own education. Saturday School students demonstrated learning by planning, creating projects, and assessing their learning experiences, at least in the early years of the program. Attendance patterns were another indicator of the success of the program. Attendance was higher at the onset of the program, when project-based learning was part of the curriculum, than in following semesters. In later semesters (2009-2010) the focus on PBL shifted to more school curriculum-based instruction and attendance lessened. This change was also a result of the change of building administrator and university faculty. It was found that as administrators and university faculty modeled less of a PBL concentration, fewer pre-service teachers endeavored to use this approach in Saturday School classrooms. Therefore, students had less autonomy with the learning activities. As this change came about, fewer students made regular attendance a priority.

Findings about the learners’ attitudes toward learning included information provided by parents, students, university faculty, and school administrators. All participants believed that the learners enjoyed Saturday School because it was more hands-on and was delivered in a smaller group setting that was more relaxed than a regular day of school with teachers who were students themselves (pre-service teachers). These learners benefited from an extra day of enrichment instruction that mirrored concepts taught in class, but went deeper to provide more autonomy with the goals of the lesson, more hands-on experiments, and a smaller student-to-teacher ratio than their traditional classroom could provide. Parents too noted the value of the program and made extraordinary effort to get their children to school on Saturdays in order to participate. These students were excited about learning in a creative manner and having the opportunity to be at school on Saturday.

The implications of this are that Saturday Schools engages students if students they participate in planning what they will learn. The larger implication is the need to use the project-based framework in the regular classroom to engage learners rather than trying to shift the learning that happened on Saturday toward a more teacher-centered planning model. As teachers were pressured by administrators to cover specific curriculum and learning outcomes, attendance at Saturday School dropped.

Further research is needed to see if the Saturday School model described here was specific to the school and participants.

Research to apply this model to other settings would inform teacher educators and school administrators whether or not this case is replicable or if each unique setting would determine the success of the program. Although other research on out-of-school and after-school programs note the criteria for success of such programs, a Saturday School approach is unique. Studies of other models of Saturday-based programming would inform the research about criteria for this specific model to engage learners outside the regular school day.

Appendix A

Interview Protocols

Students

1. Tell me about the Saturday School program you were involved in.
2. How was the Saturday School program different from regular school?
3. What did you do in Saturday school?
4. What was the best part of the Saturday program?
5. Describe a perfect day at school.
6. What was wrong with the Saturday Program?
7. Did you like Saturday School teachers?
8. Why did you choose to attend Saturday School?
9. Did Saturday school help you do better in school?
10. What would you change about Saturday School?

Parents

1. Describe the Saturday School Program.
2. How do you feel your child benefited from the program?
3. Compare Saturday school to a regular school day.
4. Was regular Saturday School attendance important to you?
5. How did you feel about Saturday School teachers?
6. Did your child's attitude toward learning change in any way during or after the program?
7. Describe a perfect classroom for your child.

8. What was unfavorable about Saturday school?
9. What would you change about Saturday School?
10. Would you like to see the program continue?

University Faculty/ Principal/PSTs

1. How did Saturday School develop?
2. Describe a typical Saturday during the program.
3. How did the students react to the program?
4. Did you see any changes in student attitude during the program?
5. Were there any behavior problems during the Saturday program?
6. What did not go as planned during the Saturday program?
7. What surprised you about the program?
8. What would you change about the program?
9. Describe a typical Saturday School classroom.
10. Describe a typical Saturday School day.

SUSAN CATAPANO, Ed.D., is Professor and Chair of the Educational Leadership Department at the University of North Carolina in Wilmington. Susan has a doctorate in higher education with concentrations in adult learning and early childhood education. She teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in educational psychology, curriculum, instruction, and supervision. She has been the principle investigator on over \$4 million in federal, state, local, and private grants. Susan's research focus is on mentoring cultural responsive new teachers to work with diverse learners. She has been the author or co-author on more than 30 publications on teacher education.

JENNY GREY, Ed.D., is a Library Media Specialist at Griffith Elementary in the Ferguson-Florissant School District. She also served as a Kindergarten classroom teacher in Ferguson-Florissant for ten years. Jenny earned her Bachelor's degree in Education from Southeast Missouri State University and her Master's degree in Education from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. She received her Doctorate degree from the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Jenny is passionate about urban education and empowering families through education and literacy.

References:

21st Century Community Learning Centers. (2000). *Providing quality afterschool learning opportunities for America's families*. Retrieved from www.ed.gov/pubs/Providing_Quality_Afterschool_Learning/report.html

Afterschool Alliance. (2009). *Uncertain times 2009: Recession imperiling afterschool programs and the children they serve*. Retrieved from http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/documents/Uncertain_Times/UncertainTimes2009KeyFindings%5B1%5D.pdf

Bainbridge, W. L., Lasley, T. J., & Sundre, S .M. (2003). Policy initiatives to improve urban schools: An agenda. *Education and Urban Society*, 35, 292-299.

- Banks, J., Au, K., Ball, A., Bell, P., Gordon, E., Gutierrez, K., Heath, S., Lee, C., Lee, Y., Mahiri, J., Nasir, N., Valdes, G., & Zhou, M. (2007). *Learning in and out of school in diverse environments*. Seattle, WA: The Life Center.
- Bradford, M. (2005). Motivating students through project-based service learning. *Technological Horizons in Education*, 32(6), 29-31.
- Bridwell, S. D. (2012). School leadership: Lessons from the lived experiences of urban teachers. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, 7(2), 52-63.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Buck Institute for Education. (2002). *Project based learning handbook*. Retrieved from http://www.bie.org/index.php/site/PBL_handbook
- Catapano, S., & Huisman, S. (2013). Leadership in hard-to-staff schools: Novice teachers as mentors. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 21(3), 258-271.
- Chard, S., & Flockhart, M. (2002). Learning in the park. *Educational Leadership*, 60(3), 53-56.
- Choemprayong, S. & Wildemuth, B. M. (2009). Case studies. In B. M. Wildemuth (Ed.), *Applications of social research methods to questions in information and library science* (pp. 51-61). Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited Press.
- Cohen, A., & Court, D. (2003). Ethnography and case study: A comparative analysis. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 7(3), 283-287.
- Conn, A. M., Calais, C., Szilagyi, M., Baldwin, C., & Jee, S. H. (2013). Youth in out-of-home care: Relation of engagement in structured group activities with social and mental health measures. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 36, p. 201-205. doi: 10.1016/j.chilyouth.2013.11.014.
- Cross, A., Gottfredson, D. C., Wilson, D. M., Rories, M., & Connell, N. (2010). Implementation quality and positive experiences in after-school programs. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45(3/4), 370-380.
- Dill, M. (2009). Strategies for teaching gifted and talented students: What is the project approach? Retrieved from www.brighthub.com/education/special/articles/22733
- Elsasser, C. W. (2008). Teaching educational philosophy: A response to the problem of first-year urban teacher transfer. *Education and Urban Society*, 40, 476-493.
- Farmer-Hinton, R. L., Lewis, J. D., Patton, L. D., & Rivers, I. D. (2013). Dear Mr. Kozol. . . . Four African American women scholars and the re-authoring of Savage Inequalities. *Teachers College Record*, 115(5), 1-38.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Gingiss, P. M., & Boerm, M. (2009). Influence of funding cuts on Texas School Tobacco Programs. *Journal of School Health*, 79(8), 361-368.
- Glickman, N. J., & Scally, C. P. (2008). Can community and education organizing improve inner-city schools? *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 30(5), 557-577.
- Gomm, R., Hammersley, M. & Foster, P. (Eds.). (2000). *Case study method: Key issues, key texts*. London: Sage Publishing.
- Grubb, R. (2011). Gifted learners in an urban setting: Challenges and opportunities. *Gifted Child Today*, 34(1), 60-62.

- Heath, S., & McLaughlin, M. (1991). Community organizations as family: Endeavors that engage and support. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 72, 623-7.
- Heath, S., & McLaughlin, M. (1993). *Identity and inner-city youth: Beyond ethnicity and gender*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Herron, S., Magomo, D., & Gossard, P. (2008). The wheel garden: Project-based learning for cross curriculum education. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(1), 44-53.
- Hertzog, N. (2007). Transporting pedagogy: Implementing the project approach in two first grade classrooms. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 18(4), 530-564.
- Hirsch, B. (2005). *A place to call home: After-school programs for urban youth* Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Katz, L., & Chard, S. (2000). *Engaging children's minds: The project approach*. Stamford, CT: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Kincheloe, J., Hayes, K., Rose, K., & Anderson P. M. (2007). *Urban education: A comprehensive guide for educators, parents, and teachers*. Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield Education.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dream keepers: Successful teachers of African American children* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Lyon, A., Frazier, S., Mehta, T., Atkins, M., & Weisbach, J. (2011). Easier said than done: Intervention sustainability in an urban after-school program. *Administration & Policy In Mental Health & Mental Health Services Research*, 38(6), 504-517.
- Manzo, K. K. (2008). After-school sessions expanding the reach of summer program. *Education Week*, 28(8), 10-11.
- Mercilliot-Hewett, V. (2001). Examining the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 29(2), 95-100.
- Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: A qualitative approach to connect households and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- Nehring, J., Lohmeier, J. H., & Colombo, M. (2009). Conversion of a large, urban high school to small schools: Leadership challenges and opportunities. *NASSP Bulletin*, 93(1), 5-26.
- Neuman, S. (2010). Empowered—After school. *Educational Leadership*, 67(7), 30-36.
- Newell, R. (2003). *Passion for learning*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Rahm, J., Moore, J. C., & Martel-Reny, M. P. (2005). The role of afterschool and community science programs in the lives of urban youth. *School Science and Mathematics*, 105(6), 283-291.
- Ravitch, D., & Viteritti J. (2000). *City schools – Lessons from New York* Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Reis, S. M. (2011). Reconsidering regular curriculum for high achieving students, gifted underachievers, and relationship between gifted and regular education. Retrieved from http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/general/faculty/reis/Reconsidering_Regular_Curriculum.html.

Renzulli, J. S. & Reis, S. M. (2011). Curriculum compacting: A research-based differentiation strategy for culturally diverse talented students. Retrieved from http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/general/faculty/reis/Compacting_for_at_Risk.html

Rua, R. (2008). After-school success stories. *American Libraries*, 39(10), 46-48.

Sachs, S. K. (2004). Evaluation of teacher attributes as predictors of success in urban schools. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55, 177-187.

Scherer, M. (2010). A time for audacity. *Educational Leadership*, 67(7), 5.

Sullivan, A. (2005). Cultural capital and educational attainment. *Sociology*, 25(4), 893-912.

Tan, E., & Barton, A. (2010). Transforming science learning and student participation in sixth grade science: A case study of a low-income, urban, racial minority classroom. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 43(1), 38-55.

Thomas, J. W. (2000). A review of research on project-based learning. San Rafael, CA: The Autodesk Foundation. Retrieved from http://www.bobpearlman.org/BestPractices/PBL_Research.pdf

U. S. Department of Education. (2015a). Laws & guidance: Elementary & secondary education. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/states/index.html>

U. S. Department of Education. (2015b). Laws & guidance: Elementary & secondary education. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/index.html>

Warshauer-Freedman S., & Appleman, D. (2009). "In it for the long haul": How teacher education can contribute to teacher retention in high-poverty, urban schools. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 60, 323-337.

Weiss, H. B., Little, P. M., Bouffard, S. M., Deschienes, S. N., & Malone, H. (2009). Strengthen what happens outside school to improve what happens inside. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(8), 592-596.

Yin, R. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yuen, L. (2009). From foot to shoes: Families' and teachers' perceptions of the project approach. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 37(1), 23-33.

[Report accessibility issues and request help](#)

Copyright 2025 The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal

Source URL:<https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-12-issue-1-spring-2015/saturday-school-implementing-project-based-learning-urban-scho>