

UNDERSTANDING THE INFLUENCE OF PARTICIPATION IN VOLUNTEER
COMMUNITY SERVICE ON GED PREPARATION STUDENTS

by

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(Under the Direction of Desna L. Wallin)

ABSTRACT

This qualitative inquiry sought to understand the influence of participation in volunteer community service on GED preparation students in rural Georgia two-year colleges. The following three research questions were used in interviews with GED preparation students to explore the issue:

1. What did students learn by participating in volunteer community service?
2. How do students view learning after participating in volunteer community service?
3. How has volunteering affected their civic engagement?

Eleven interview participants were students in three GED programs who were involved in volunteer community service projects under the guidance of their teachers. Research was conducted through the use of tape-recorded interviews. Three major findings emerged from this study: (1) the students learned about community needs and their personal power to help meet those needs; (2) they became aware of their personal learning style and became more motivated to learn; and (3) they became more aware of and engaged in civic issues. Further, three important conclusions can be drawn from the findings: (1) GED teachers can use volunteer community service as an instructional tool; (2) GED teachers who involve their students in volunteer community service should

engage them in formal reflection for maximum learning; and (3) including volunteer community service in GED preparation instruction would have implications for state and federal policies. An understanding of the interview participants' responses can expand the knowledge of best practices in GED preparation instruction.

INDEX WORDS: Adult Education, Community Service, GED Diploma, GED Exam, GED Students, Service-learning, Volunteerism

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DEDICATION

To my children, Vonnie and Stuart, for not letting me give up and always encouraging me with, “You can do it, Mom!”

To my grandsons – Cole, Jordan, and Jakob – for loving me in spite of my missing so many baseball games over five years

To Skippy, my friend and editor, for actually reading my dissertation and keeping it mechanically correct and reassuring me that I could make deadline

And to Dee and Ridley, for always being there with sympathetic ears, shoulders to lean on, and a glass of wine to lift my spirits

You all made it possible for me to persevere.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Robert Putnam (2000) in *Bowling Alone* bemoaned the loss of connection among people. He wrote of people's indifference to each other and to society in general. Even as Putnam was giving voice to this phenomenon, an old idea was gaining renewed acceptance among political leaders, sociologists, and educators – that of reestablishing this connection by fostering learning through participation in community service, or volunteerism. Researchers Eyler and Giles (1999) echoed Putnam's theory in discussing the absence of connectedness in students:

Lack of connectedness [has] resulted in the compartmentalization of knowledge by discipline, preventing students from experiencing the relationships among various modes of knowledge....Students also [have] experienced a lack of connection between classroom learning and their personal lives and between classroom learning and public issues and involvement in the wider world. (p. 13)

One possible remedy for the absence of connectedness among students may be helping them find opportunities to participate in volunteer community service. The term *community service* is generally understood to mean activities in which a person engages voluntarily in order to benefit others or the community. Interest in involving students in volunteer community service as part of the educational experience appears to be growing. From 1984 until 2005, community service initiatives for public high school students increased from 27 to 55 percent (Sitter, 2006). Educators who are part of this approach to education work in K-12 school systems and at colleges and universities. The type of community service in which they generally involve their students is service-learning that

is a structured part of the curriculum. This study focused on students preparing for the General Educational Development exam and the role of participation in volunteer community service in their development. The benefits to these students from participating in volunteer community service appear to be similar to the benefits to students engaged in service-learning. A discussion of service-learning is included in Chapter 2 because of the connection between the concepts of service-learning and volunteer community service.

Literature abounds (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Denson, Vogelgesang, & Saenz, 2005; Eyler, 2002; Sitter, 2006) on the positive impact of volunteer service activities on students from K-12 through colleges and universities. In recent years, researchers have reported the trend toward learning through community service. As this movement grows, advocates agree that volunteer service is beneficial to the students involved. Eyler and Giles (1999) found that, "Community experiences that challenge student assumptions coupled with thoughtful reflection may lead to fundamental changes in the way the student views service or society" (p. 17). Advocates discuss how participation in volunteer community service increases students' interest in their community and teaches them that an individual can make a difference in a social issue. "For some students [the] pleasure in helping others was closely linked to their growing sense of personal competence" (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 37). Further, Eyler and Giles said that improved personal efficacy is a predictor of active citizenship participation

The term "student" calls up images of K-12 children and teen-agers or traditional college and university students. Another group of students, often non-traditional in age, will be the subjects of this study. These are adult students who did not complete high school and are attending General Educational Development (GED) preparation classes.

None of the studies this researcher examined addresses what happens when GED preparation students participate in volunteer community service projects in conjunction with their studies. It would appear that students in GED classes would react to volunteering in community projects much like adult students in other campus settings. An understanding of what the GED exam is, who GED preparation students are, and why adults learn well through experience is necessary for exploring the role of volunteer community service in the development of GED preparation students. This chapter will present the philosophical foundations for community service and its link to education, trace the development of the GED diploma and GED exam, explain the characterizations of these students by instructional providers, summarize the research on participation in volunteer community service, and discuss the central role of experiential learning in the education of adult students. Additionally, it will include the statement of the problem, purpose of the paper, research questions, and significance of the study.

Philosophical Foundations of Community Service and its Link to Education

Participation in volunteer community service projects can be a vehicle for experiential learning. The theory of experiential learning has its roots in the works of Dewey who published his ideas on learning through experience in *The School Journal* in 1897. In the article, he set forth the idea of connecting current learning to knowledge already acquired and to future potential knowledge. He referred to education as *living* rather than *preparing for living in the future* [italics added for emphasis]. Dewey did not separate theory and practice; rather, he saw activity as a transaction between a person and the environment that ultimately changed both (Bredo, 1994). According to Dewey (1938), "...there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection

between education and personal experience” (p. 25). The role of experience in the learning process, born in Dewey’s philosophy, remains prevalent in modern approaches to adult learning (Merriam & Brockett, 1997).

Nearly a decade after Dewey, James (1906) echoed Dewey’s premise that learning is a continuing activity (Kolb, 1984). In his essay “The Moral Equivalent of War,” James presented the idea that service to the community is a learning experience. His premise was that, since war is immoral, its moral equivalent would be conscription of all youth into a service of manual labor – in coal mines, on freight trains, and on fishing fleets. These young people would wash windows, dishes, and clothes. They would build roads, tunnels, and skyscrapers. James believed that, as a result of this work, the people so employed would mature and return to society with an understanding of and a sensitivity to their fellow humans.

The idea that community service can contribute to one’s education grew out of Dewey’s belief in the educative power of experience. Dewey offered the concepts of reflection, community-centered education, and the value of service to others as the basis of sound education (Denton, 1997-1998). Dewey’s philosophy provided the foundation for the theory of experiential learning. Kolb (1984) outlined three models of experiential learning – one of which is Dewey’s. Another is Lewin’s model of action research and laboratory training which proposes that when people share an experience, they can share it in concrete and in abstract terms. The third model Kolb discussed is that of learning and cognitive development offered by Piaget whose position was that adult thought rests on experience, concept, reflection, and action. Each of these models informs the practice of integrating participation in volunteer community service into the adult learning

experience. This study sought to determine how participating in volunteer community service influences students who attend adult education classes to prepare for the General Educational Development exam. The following section is an overview of the history of the General Educational Development diploma.

General Educational Development Exam and Diploma

A group of students, separate from those in K-12 and college, is attending classes regularly and studying for a secondary education diploma. These students are enrolled in General Educational Development (GED) programs. The youngest are 16 years old. There is no upper age limit. For a variety of reasons, they never completed high school and have entered GED study seeking an equivalency diploma. For them, the GED is the second-chance route to a secondary education.

The GED diploma is unique to American education. During World War II, approximately one-third of the men and women in the military had attended but not graduated from high school; one-fourth had graduated from high school but had not attended college; one-tenth had attended but not graduated from college (Mullane, 2001). World War II veterans became the first to take the GED examination in 1943. Its original purpose was to certify that those without a high school diploma had the academic skills to take advantage of college opportunities provided by the G.I. Bill of Rights signed by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1944 (Tyler, 2005).

In 1947, New York became the first state to allow high school leavers who were not veterans to take the GED exam. Popularity of the exam began a steady growth in 1954 that continued for nearly a decade. From 88,000 people who attempted the GED exam in 1963, the number swelled to 300,000 in 1970 and 816,000 in 1980. That growth

can be explained in part by the mid-1960s involvement of the federal government in addressing the needs of undereducated and unemployed adults. The Adult Basic Education Program through the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 provided for instructional programs for people at least 18 years of age whose reading and writing ability was not sufficient for them to secure or retain employment. By the end of 1966, all states provided federally funded adult literacy instruction. States began funneling money into the programs as well. As colleges and universities increasingly accepted the GED as an admissions credential, other sources of financial aid – such as Pell Grant money – became available to GED graduates for college tuition (Tyler, 2005).

The GED exam consists of a battery of five tests: mathematics, writing, reading, social studies, and science. It tests general rather than curriculum-specific knowledge. The fourth generation of the exam, GED 2002, was implemented in January of 2002. The exam has evolved from testing traditional high-school academic skills to include more business-related and adult-context questions on all five tests. One aspect that has remained constant is that, to pass the GED exam, one must achieve a minimum of 60% of the skill level of graduating high school seniors (Tyler, 2005).

According to a 1999 report by the American Council on Education, GED exams historically have been based on two foundations to allow people who take the GED exam an opportunity to demonstrate achievement comparable to that of high school students. First, test content conforms as closely as possible to the core academic curricula of high schools in the United States. Second, score scales result from periodic normings of the GED tests based on a random stratified nationally representative sample of graduating high school seniors. The GED exam now is available in the United States and its

territories, at United States military installations and in Canada. Woodward (1999) proposed that, “Based on the 1996 norming and the 1997 initiation of a higher minimum passing score requirement, over one-third of graduating high school seniors would not pass the GED test” (p. 4). People who withdraw from high school without graduating generally are not academically prepared to pass the GED examination. Statistics show that 676,020 people took the GED exam in 2005, but only 398,409 passed it (“Who passed,” 2006).

Adult literacy programs – more commonly called adult education programs – funded with federal and state tax dollars through the Technical College System of Georgia Office of Adult Education report statistics on a statewide database called the Georgia Adult Learner Information System (GALIS). Figures derived from this database show that of 49,213 students participating in fiscal year 2007 in Georgia’s adult literacy classes 43,294 entered the program possessing skills at eighth-grade level or below (GALIS, 2007). The following section outlines the characteristics of GED students.

Characterizations of GED students

Two primary models of adult literacy students have emerged in literature. These are the deficit model and the asset model. Green (2006) used the term *deficit model* to characterize “minority, low-income, and first-generation college students [who lack] the skills and abilities to succeed in higher education” (p. 24). Adult literacy students often are victims of deficit-model thinking on the part of literacy providers because they come predominantly from low-income families. Ozanne, Adkins, and Sandlin (2005) reject the stereotype of the deficit model. They maintain that literacy is socially constructed and that it has different meanings according to its use. For example, people with low levels of

literacy may function well as consumers because of their life experiences. A decade ago, Fingeret and Drennon (1997) described literacy as a social practice in which adults act in relation to the situation in which they find themselves. Moving from the deficit model to a model based on student strengths requires educators to focus on students' abilities and trust them to be able to think critically and arrive at conclusions (Green, 2006).

Community service may be particularly helpful in increasing engagement [in learning] and motivation [to learn] of students from disadvantaged circumstances (Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, & Benson, 2006). According to Kozol (1985), pride prevents people from wanting things done for them. They prefer instead to be part of planning as well as executing any effort to increase their educational skill levels.

Engaging adult students in community service could be a way to encourage instructors to move away from the deficit model by allowing them to capitalize on the students' strengths. Community service activities can involve students in planning and executing a project.

Greive (2003) said that when adults enter education programs, they come with expectations that are different, for the most part, from the expectations of younger students. Adults generally know what they want and where they want to go. They can be demanding as consumers. They bring with them rich life experiences. And most importantly, they expect to be treated as adults. These characteristics appear in the adult GED preparation population just as they do in other adults. The desire to learn may not be quite enough to assure success for adult literacy students. According to Thoms (2001), to achieve positive learning outcomes, teachers and administrators need to recognize learning and learning strategies appropriate to adults. "Faculty can help students become

more motivated, especially when they understand characteristics of adult learners, motivation and its role in the workplace, strategies and activities for promoting motivation in adult learners, and key players in adult learning” (p. 2).

Adult literacy instructors may want to replace the deficit model with an asset, or student strengths, model (Green, 2006) by identifying what has value for each participant and approach instruction from that standpoint. One way of using the asset model is in community service. Volunteer community service may provide a vehicle for helping GED students identify more clearly and articulate their personal values. GED preparation students often already are involved in the world of family, community, and work. Even though they may be active in church or other organizations, they may have missed the opportunity to engage in learning-related volunteer service as part of their education because they left high school without graduating. Many do not enroll in higher education after earning a GED diploma. This view of GED students prompts researchers and practitioners to focus on the need for real-life contexts for GED preparation instruction. Workplace Literacy, for example, has the workplace for a classroom. Jacobson, Degener, and Purcell-Gates (2003) determined that students who learn in workplace programs show greater gains in job-related and in general literacy skills than students who participate only in a general literacy program.

Research on Participation in Volunteer Community Service

A wealth of research (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Denson, Vogelgesang, & Saenz, 2005; Eyler, 2002; Sitter, 2006) addresses the positive influence of community service on other types of students. Areas most often identified by researchers as impacted by community service are (a) civic engagement, (b) self efficacy,

and (c) academic achievement. According to Denson, Vogelgesang, and Saenz (2005), “there are enough connections between civic volunteerism and political engagement to warrant further investigation” (p. 5). They conclude that “any attempts to improve the civic mission of higher education [should] encourage student involvement in volunteerism [to enhance] students’ commitment to addressing civic and social concerns even after [the students] leave college” (p. 5). Eyler and Giles (1999) have concluded that community service “affected students’ valuing of social justice, as well as their belief that it is important to have an impact on the political system” (p. 158). Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000), in a study they conducted with college undergraduates for the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, pointed to personal efficacy as an impact of volunteer service and found it often coupled with a heightened sense of civic responsibility. The most common outcome identified by students they surveyed was “gaining a sense of personal effectiveness” (p. 59). Eyler and Giles determined that risking involvement requires self confidence. Community service “by providing the opportunity to act, as well as an important context in which to act, would be expected to help students develop a personal sense of their competence” (p. 39).

According to Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, and Benson (2006), community service may be related to academic achievement as well. In a recent study they concluded that the impact on students’ academic achievement results from the students’ “feeling of usefulness and being valued” (p. 55). Strage (2004) concluded in her study of a group of college child development majors that community service provides students with a particularly firm foundation upon which to build as they move forward in their academic careers. Despite the amount of literature addressing the issue of

community service as it involves students from K-12 through college, there is a dearth of information on possible effects of volunteer community service on students in the GED preparation programs.

According to Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998), adult educators tried for years to reduce illiteracy by teaching reading, writing, and math. The dropout rate among literacy students was high and the motivation low. Determining that instructors were not teaching academic material in such a manner as to be relevant to adult learners, researchers developed new curricula built around life situations for teaching adult students in general. Involvement in a volunteer community service project has the potential for giving GED students the opportunity to use their skills in a life situation for learning outside of the classroom

Community service can provide a source for obtaining the kind of knowledge which Kolb (1984) said does not exist in books, mathematical formulas, or philosophical systems. This “process of learning from experience that shapes and actualizes developmental potentialities” (p. 133) is the basis of Kolb’s experiential learning theory. This theory guided this research project and provided a framework for interviews with GED preparation students who have engaged in volunteer community service activities.

Experiential Learning

Dewey (1938) described traditional education as “bodies of information and of skills that have been worked out in the past” (p. 17). Teachers use books to perpetuate this information by transmitting it to the next generation. The newer education Dewey promoted had as its central principle the “organic connection between education and personal experience” (p. 25). Experiential learning, the theory that guided this research

project, has as its foundation Dewey's work. It provides a venue for experiences which allow people to be authentic and make a difference in their world (Bialeschki, 2007).

One experiential approach is to enable students to learn through volunteering for community service. This activity seems consistent with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. According to Kolb et al. (1999), "The Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) provides a holistic model of the learning process and a multilinear model of adult development, both of which are consistent with what we know about how people learn, grow, and develop" (p. 2). It emphasizes the central role of experience in the learning process distinguishing it from other learning theories (1999). Kolb (1984) described experiential learning as occurring in three developmental stages: (a) acquisition, (b) specialization, and (c) integration. In the first step, learners acquire basic skills to access and use the tools of social knowledge. The second stage involves selecting and socializing learners into areas of knowledge suited to their talents and meeting society's needs. The third is the development of the whole person.

The term "experiential learning" generally refers to learning that takes place in settings outside the classroom (Merriam & Brockett, 1997) as in volunteer community service, for example. Experiential learning does not occur as an isolated event. Instead, learners connect what they are learning to what they already know and what may occur in the future (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). Among the assumptions of experiential education is that students will encounter circumstances that will surprise them. This exposure to situations and information that is new to them and different from their views of the world should challenge the students to continue exploring (Eyler, 2002).

According to Fenwick (2000), “the term *experiential learning* is often used to distinguish this ongoing meaning making from theoretical knowledge and nondirected informal life experience from formal education” (p. 243). She compared five perspectives of experiential learning while using the term to mean a process of human cognition. She also chose the term because of its “well established tradition in adult education” (p. 245). Fenwick titled the five currents of thought on experiential learning as follows: reflection, interference, resistance, co-emergence, and participation.

The first, reflection, is a constructivist perspective. It calls upon learners to construct knowledge through hands-on learning and reflecting on the experience (Fenwick, 2000). It is Dewey’s theory that current learning is connected to knowledge already acquired and to future potential knowledge that suggests that learners *construct* knowledge from their experiences by linking new experiences with existing knowledge. They also construct knowledge and skills through interaction with others and the environment and by reflecting on their experiences (Askov, 2000).

The second, interference, according to Fenwick (2000) is a psychoanalytic perspective which addresses, in part, “the tensions between the learner, knowledge, and educator” (p. 250). The premise is that the unconscious interferes with intentions as well as conscious perceptions of experience. Experiential learning then, as it relates to this theory, is the act of tolerating conflicting desires while recovering selves repressed by fear of self-knowledge.

A third perspective is resistance, a critical cultural perspective with power as the core issue. While experiential learning occurs in classrooms, it also takes place in many nonformal learning settings (Fenwick, 2000). Where learning in classrooms may have

been tempered by accustomed roles and structures of dominance within a group, experiential learning, which is described as learning in nonformal settings, may have an emancipatory effect on learners.

Fourth, co-emergence is the enactivist perspective of experiential learning which involves various sensomotor capacities within the human body (Fenwick, 2000). It rejects the notion that knowledge is a substantive thing to be acquired. It is related to situated cognition in its premise that relationships bind together such components as the person, experience, community, and activity.

Finally, participation, a situative perspective (Fenwick, 2000), may be the perspective that is the most relevant to this study. The theory underpinning the participation perspective is that “individuals learn as they participate by interacting with the community...the tools at hand...and the moment’s activity” (p. 253). Critics have argued that students who are unsupervised in authentic environments for learning may simply “reinforce negative practices that the community is trying to eliminate” (p. 255). The educator’s role is to help learners participate in community practices in such a way that they can move into legitimate roles within the community. Educators who involve their students in volunteer community service projects to supplement their class work provide the students with such an opportunity for experiential learning.

According to Patton (2002), researchers must study the human world differently from the natural, physical world because the two are different. Humans have evolved to the ability to construct reality from their individual worldview; therefore, each person’s way of making sense of the world is as valid as any other’s (2002). People construct new knowledge by combining their held worldview with new experiences. GED preparation

students bring their worldview with them when they enroll in adult literacy classes. The new knowledge they gain may contradict or confirm their held beliefs. Yet, by combining the old view and new experiences, they begin to see through other lenses. Through the experiential learning inherent in community service activity, GED preparation students may be able to construct new knowledge.

Problem Statement

It appears that little if any research has addressed the possible impact of volunteer community service on GED preparation students. The absence of such research leaves a gap in the body of knowledge and thus a lack of resources on the subject for adult educators. This is the gap that the research for this inquiry proposed to help fill.

Students in the K-12 system, two-year and four-year colleges, and universities often have the opportunity for involvement in service learning as part of their education. Proponents of service learning say that the experience expands their horizons in a variety of ways. Service-learning may be too structured to be useful in adult literacy programs; however, community service may offer possibilities similar to those of service-learning. There appears to be a connection between service-learning and the volunteer community service in which some adult literacy instructors involve their GED preparation students. Research suggests that adults learn best through hands-on experience (Dewey, 1897, 1938; Knowles, 1970; & Kolb, 1984). Students enrolled in formal GED preparation classes engage in multiple ways – with their instructors, their peers, the media, everyday experiences. The real-life context of the learner's community can become an alternative classroom where these adult students can get hands-on experience as service volunteers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the influence of participation in volunteer community service on GED preparation students. The inquiry addressed the following questions:

1. What did students learn by participating in volunteer community service?
2. How do students view learning after participating in volunteer community service?
3. How has volunteering affected their civic engagement?

The first and second questions dealt with learning. This research explored first what students feel that they learned as a result of participating in volunteer service. The second question tried to determine how students see themselves as learners after their community service experience.

The third research question addressed the influence of participation in volunteer community service on the self-efficacy of GED preparation students. When students engage in community projects, they bring all their skills into play in learning how to work toward the solution of a problem. The question then becomes how, upon seeing that they can make a difference as citizens, their confidence in their own ability to solve problems – their self- efficacy – will change.

The fourth question addressed the issue of how participation in volunteer community service can increase GED preparation students' civic engagement – that is, their involvement in political or humanitarian activities that affect the quality of life of residents of a community. These students come more often than not from disadvantaged circumstances (Beder, 1991). Further, while many are literate consumers and negotiate

the consumer world effectively, others often are voiceless because they are not able to deal with the stigmatization of poor academic literacy skills (Ozanne, Adkins, & Sandlin, 2005). In other words, they do not know how to address social problems. This research sought to determine whether, after participating as volunteers in community service, these students become more aware of the needs of the community and be willing to take an active role in addressing them.

Significance of the Study

This study is important to several groups of people including GED students, providers of GED preparation instructional opportunities, employers, and the community. For understanding how volunteer community service may contribute to the development of these students and for improving instructional practices, it has both theoretical and practical significance.

The responses to the research questions should inform the practice of GED instruction. Practitioners will be able to expand the GED instructional curriculum by taking the students out of the classroom for real-world experiences through volunteer community service. Kolb (1984) said. "...experiential learning has become the method of choice for learning and personal development" (p. 3) for many non-traditional students including mature adults. It has become an accepted instructional method in colleges and universities nationwide. This learning through experience can give adults a greater awareness and better understanding of social issues, show them that they can make a difference in their world, and encourage them to continue to pursue learning.

Since existing research on student involvement in volunteer community service focuses on students in the K-12 system and in colleges and universities, this study

expands the research by exploring the phenomenon as it applies to GED preparation students. It has the potential to support adding community service as a component of GED instructions.

The results of the study can indicate whether participation in volunteer community service is a useful activity in conjunction with GED preparation classroom instruction. If such activity appears to have a positive effect on the education of GED students, this finding could expand the existing knowledge of best practices in GED instruction. Students and adult literacy providers would benefit. Students would exit their program with skills – the ability to think critically, for example – that they could combine with those acquired in the formal, academic setting of the classroom. Instructors would have a vehicle and a justification for expanding their instruction in ways that would pique their students' interest in areas that could translate into greater engagement in learning. Employers hiring workers who received a holistic education that incorporated not only academics but also real-world experiences could find in their employees an attitude of self-efficacy and a propensity for civic engagement. Communities would benefit from having an increased number of citizens who understood community needs and their own responsibility for involvement. Thus, the students also may meet standards set by the National Institute of Adult Literacy for adult knowledge and skills (Stein, 2000).

Summary

Chapter 1 defines community service as service provided for the benefit of the recipient. Research has shown a positive effect of such service when it is part of the education of students in K-12 school systems, colleges, and universities. However, little if any research appears to have addressed the impact of participation in voluntary community service on GED preparation students. GED students are characterized in two ways by providers of GED preparation instruction and by others as well. One characterization is the deficit model which portrays GED students as minority, low income, and low literate. The student-strengths model is that of a person who has poor academic skills but is a literate consumer. Research on volunteer community service indicates that the results for the participants are increased civic engagement and self-efficacy as well as academic progress.

The theory of experiential learning guided the research for this study. Service-learning, a form of volunteering common in K-12 systems, colleges, and universities, provides a vehicle for experiential learning. Volunteer community service likely will do the same for GED preparation students. The purpose of this study was to understand the influence of volunteer community service on GED students. The research questions used in interviews with GED students to research this issue were as follows:

1. What did students learn by participating in volunteer community service?
2. How do students view learning after participating in volunteer community service?
3. How has volunteering affected their civic engagement?

This study will be important to GED students, providers of GED instruction, employers and communities because it can inform the practice of GED instruction. It can add to the knowledge of best practices in the field.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The term *community service* generally is applied to activities in which people become involved voluntarily so that they can benefit others or a community. Eyler and Giles (1999) posited that when students participate in community service, they may experience a change in their view of society. Seider (2006) proposed that educators can play a role by supporting students in their commitment to volunteering. According to Mündel and Schugurensky (2008), significant learning takes place when students participate in volunteer work to improve their communities. The purpose of this study was to understand the influence of participation in volunteer community service on General Educational Development preparation students in the Technical College System of Georgia.

Even though it is distinct from community service, service-learning embodies tenets of community service. Therefore, for purposes of this inquiry, service-learning is an important teaching methodology. Service-learning appears to enhance student commitment to school and prepares students to be contributing citizens in their communities. Outcomes of participation in adult education are defined in terms of achievement. The most common goal of those who enroll in adult education classes is obtaining a GED diploma. Students enter adult education programs at different levels of educational attainment; therefore, they progress toward their goal at different rates. Thus it is important to use other measures of success as well (Bingman & Ebert, 2000). It is likely that participation in volunteer community service can become such an additional

measure of success. Although it is less structured, volunteer community service could have the same effect on GED preparation students that service-learning has on K-12, college, and university students. If engaging GED students in community service has effects similar to those of service-learning, it can help can help fulfill the mission of the Georgia Office of Adult Education which is

... to enable every learner in Georgia to acquire the necessary basic skills – reading, writing, computation, speaking, and listening – to compete successfully in today’s workplace, strengthen family foundations, and exercise full citizenship.
(p. 1)

Proponents of real-life learning contexts have yet to suggest community service as an option for inclusion in general literacy GED preparation. This oversight may be explained by the lack of theory on adult literacy instruction. Comings and Soricone (2007) addressed the issue of the absence of theory on which to develop models for instruction in adult literacy. The lack of research that would develop such theory may be a result of what they described as “ a low level of research funding, a small number of academics committed to this field, and a limited number of journals focused on adult literacy” (p.15). They did point out that adult literacy sometimes builds models by drawing on instructional theory from the K-12 system. The problem with this practice is that K-12 instructional theory targets children and adolescents rather than adult learners.

Bingman, Ebert, and Bell (2000) reported that students in a learner identified outcomes study said that changes in their lives after attending adult literacy classes were “varied, contextual, and inter-related. Measuring changes in educational levels with standardized tests will not give program and policy makers information about these

outcomes” (p. 14). Merrifield (1998) pointed out that it is important to understand what students do with what they learn when literacy is woven into social relationships.

Standardized tests do not give this information. However, students’ feelings about their participation in volunteer community service may provide it.

Stein (2000) identified three role maps for adults in determining what knowledge and skills they will need in the 21st century according to the National Institute for Adult Literacy system reform effort, Equipped for the Future (EFF). These are Citizen/Community Member, Parent/Family, and Worker. As citizen/community members, adults will need to become and stay informed, form and express opinions, work together, and take action to strengthen communities. Service-learning appears to increase civic engagement among participants; community service may do the same for adults in GED preparation classes. If so, it can help address one of the content standards of EFF reform which prepares students as adults for the Citizen/Community Member role map.

Denson, Vogelgesang, and Saenz (2005) have proposed that enough connections between civic volunteerism and political engagement exist to call for additional study and that service-learning has come to be seen as a way to involve students in civic engagement while they are young. Their study found that students who participated in service-learning while in college were more politically engaged after college than those who did not. They maintained that their findings aligned with those of Eyster and Giles (1999) and also proposed that higher education should encourage student involvement not only in service-learning but in volunteerism in general. Students take their held world view into new situations. Eyster (2002) pointed out that citizens attempting to address social issues must be able to evaluate conflicting information and make decisions.

Service-learning allows the challenging of students' assumptions about social problems through their service experience. Civic engagement is not always at the heart of education (Musil, 2003). However, "societal and cognitive development ... results when students step outside of their comfort zones [and] student-centered pedagogies [can] foster engaged, participatory learning" (p. 5). Hepburn (1997) traced the philosophy of civics in education back to the early 1900s. She brought it forward through community service civics, experiential learning, and service-learning. She concluded that "Service learning in civic education brings together experiences of both rights and responsibilities, a connection that is essential to democratic communities" (p. 141). Participation in volunteer community service can afford GED students very much the same experience.

Literature that addresses the impact of volunteer service on students seems to focus on the K-12 school system, two-year and four-year colleges, and universities (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Denson, Vogelgesang, & Saenz, 2005; Eyster, 2002; Sitter, 2006). GED students, who are the subjects of this study, comprise a group that is distinctly different from the student populations in the above-mentioned systems in several ways. For example, GED students do not pay tuition or other fees. They are not required to purchase books or supplies. Usually, they are non-traditional, part-time students. Many of the younger GED students enroll in classes under mandates either from the courts or from their parents, but most adult students attend voluntarily. These characteristics of GED preparation students suggest that teachers may face challenges as they attempt to help their students become involved in community service projects. Adults who enroll in GED classes of their own volition seem to be more enthusiastic about the opportunities available because they generally view GED preparation as a

second chance at a formal education. Teachers often find motivating younger students – particularly those who are still teen-agers – more difficult because many of them bring with them the attitudes that resulted in their dropping out or being dismissed from high school. It appears that previous research has not determined whether GED preparation students' experience in volunteering would parallel those of students in other education systems. The body of literature on this subject is immature because little if any research thus far has addressed the subject as it pertains to GED preparation students.

This chapter will discuss the literature which provides the foundations for this study. The first section will include definitions of community service as they relate to the private sector and to education. The discussion of definitions will segue into a presentation of the philosophical foundations rooted in the works of Dewey (1897) who saw education as connecting learning to existing knowledge. The second section will address the philosophical and theoretical framework for the research. Experiential learning is the theory that informed the study. This term generally refers to learning that takes place outside of a classroom. The basic premise of the experiential learning theory is that people construct knowledge by interacting with and participating in the community (Fenwick, 2000). As students gain new knowledge from their experiences, they may find their beliefs confirmed or contradicted. This theory is related to situated cognition in that the learner, the experience, and the community are inextricably bound together.

One barrier that hampered conducting research for this study is that almost all scholarly literature on service and its link to education deals with the specific area of volunteer service known as service-learning. Also a type of experiential learning, service-learning shares aspects in common with volunteer community service; however, the co-

curricular and reflection components of service-learning make it a unique type of volunteering. The third section of this chapter will discuss service-learning specifically. It will outline the benefits touted by advocates of service-learning and the criticisms voiced by detractors. It also will contrast community service with service-learning. A discussion of service-learning is ancillary to this study because service-learning literature offers the best source to date for information on the influence of volunteering on students.

The fourth section will identify GED preparation students in Georgia. This group is a unique student population. Authorities differ in their view of these students. Some providers see GED students as persons with limited skills and low self esteem (Beder, 1991) while others see them as inherently capable of success (Ozanne, Adkins, & Sandlin, 2005). The fifth section addresses the three research questions to be used in interviews with GED preparation students who will be interview participants in this study.

The following databases were sources in this literature search: ERIC, EBSCO Host, Dissertation Abstracts International at ProQuest, Education Abstracts at Proquest, and Academic Search Complete.

Definitions and Foundations

Community service generally is understood to refer to activities in which people engage voluntarily for the benefit of others or the community as a whole. Volunteering in community service activities is approximately twice as common among Americans as it is among citizens of other countries (Putnam, 2000). Churches promote it. Many civic organizations – i.e. Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions clubs – are termed “service clubs.” For some adults, involvement in service to others began in school. Students in K-12 systems,

colleges, and universities regularly have opportunities to participate in community service usually through various student organizations. These volunteer projects are as diverse as cleaning up following a storm, tutoring children, delivering food to the needy, and participating in the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life. A study Astin and Sax conducted in 1998 concluded that when students engage in community service activities, they are more likely to be committed to their communities, more empowered, and more committed to education (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999). When students enroll in GED preparation classes, they focus on obtaining a GED diploma. It appears that, currently, few GED instructors engage their students in community service.

Volunteer service and its link to education is not a new concept. For decades it attracted the attention of educators, politicians, and other leaders. An early manifestation in this country of connecting volunteer service to education may have been rooted in the Morrill Act signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862 creating the first land grant colleges. Part of the purpose of these colleges was to provide both liberal and "practical" education (Titlebaum, Williamson, Daprano, Baer & Brahler, 2002). Other related events began occurring within the first two decades of the twentieth century. As early as 1915, for example, some folk schools in Appalachia became two-year and four-year colleges that connected work, service, and learning. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, during the 1930s, created the Civilian Conservation Corps that gave millions of young people the opportunity to revitalize national parks, and thereby the economy, and support their families and themselves. The GI Bill, in 1944, offered education as a reward for military service. President John F. Kennedy authorized the Peace Corps in 1961. President Lyndon B. Johnson created the VISTA volunteers in 1964. In East Tennessee, Oak Ridge

Associated Universities used the term “service-learning” to describe a federally funded project which linked students and faculty with tributary area development in 1966 and 1967. National service efforts which continued in the 1980s were launched at the grassroots level to prepare future leaders. In the middle of the next decade, Congress passed the King Holiday and Service Act of 1994 directing the Corporation of National Service to organize Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day as a day of service. Near the same time, President George Bush created the Office of National Service and Points of Light Foundation (Titlebaum, Williamson, Daprano, Baer, & Brahler, 2004). Many of the events seem related at least as closely if not more closely to volunteer community service as to service-learning. The next section of this paper will discuss experiential learning, beginning with its foundations, as it relates to the education of adults.

Experiential Learning

Any inquiry into the influence of participation in community service on students must look to Dewey (1897) for its basic philosophy. He laid the foundation for the link between service and education in an article in *The School Journal*. He proposed that “education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience” (p. 6). According to Dewey, the social life should be the center of correlation to school subjects rather than the disciplines of science, literature, history, and geography. Further, he said that “the only true education comes through the stimulation of ... powers by the demands of the social situations” (p. 1). It would appear that community service when carried out in the context of education would nevertheless take place in a social situation. Another major premise emerged from Dewey’s work, *Experience and Education*. It was his belief in “the organic connection between education and personal experience” and that “all

genuine education comes about through experience” (p. 25). However, he also maintained that not all experience is educative. He pointed out that students in traditional classrooms had experiences; however, these experiences were largely “of the wrong kind” (p. 26) because they formed no connection for students to their future experiences. Dewey supported progressive education which he deemed more compatible with the ideals of democracy and promoted a better quality of experiences. He spoke of a continuum on which each experience is influenced by those that precede it and influences those that follow it. He further qualified his premise by saying that “all human experience is ultimately social; that it involves contact and communication” (p. 38). He tied the idea of education to community when he maintained that a teacher should have intimate knowledge of the local community to use the community as an educational resource. One way teachers today, including those who instruct GED students, can use the community as an educational resource is to lead their students into participation in community service projects. Ultimately, Dewey believed that “for education to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and society [it] must be based on experience” (p. 89). According to Kolb (1984), Dewey saw experiential learning as a spiral rather than a circle. This spiral provides each episode of experience with the potential for movement from acceptance to choice and purpose. Dewey’s philosophy of the value of experience in education remains prevalent in modern approaches to adult learning (Merriam & Brockett, 1997).

James (1906) also saw virtue in service to community. He expanded Dewey’s philosophy by adding the idea of experience acquired from public service. He proposed that all youth should be required to perform service of manual labor as a counterpoint to

conscription into military service. The result of this service would be that the youth would return home to be better teachers for the following generation. According to Kolb (1984), James “marveled at the fact that consciousness is continuous [therefore] continuity of experience [is] a powerful truth of human existence, central to the theory of learning” (p. 27). Thus, James, like Dewey, saw experience as a vital component of education. According to Merriam and Brockett (1997), experience as the core aspect of adult learning pervades the theory and practice of adult education. This type of learning potentially may provide the continuity that is missing in traditional GED instruction.

Kolb’s work *Experiential Learning* is perhaps the best known presentation of the experiential approach to education (Miettinen, 2000). Kolb (1984) credited Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget with being founders of the approach that links experience and education with Dewey’s philosophy having provided the foundation for the theory. The three models of experiential learning Kolb discussed in his book including Dewey’s are Lewin’s model of action research and laboratory training based on the premise that people share an experience in concrete and abstract terms and Piaget’s position that incorporates experience, concept, reflection, and action in adult thought. In his work Kolb defined learning as “a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). He described the process of learning as a cycle in four stages that include four adaptive learning models – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. He paired concrete experience/abstract conceptualization and active experimentation/reflective observation to form two opposing adaptive orientations. Transactions among these four adaptive modes form the structural bases of the learning process. Therefore, knowledge “results

from the combination of grabbing experience and transforming it,” Kolb said (p. 41). He also cited other theories such as those he termed the “therapeutic psychologies” (p. 15) appearing in the work especially of Jung, Rogers, and Maslow. This school of thought adds to the theory of experiential learning the ideas of adaptation and socioemotional development.

The physical and social experiences, situations in which learners find themselves, and the tools they use are significant aspects of the learning process (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). Despite the long history of exploring the influence of experience on learning, researchers continually expand their knowledge of the connections between learning and experience. A central theme running through scholarly works on adults’ learning is that adults learn from experience by connecting current knowledge to past and possible future experiences (1999). However, experience alone does not constitute learning. According to Kolb (1984), each of the four adaptations – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation – must be part of the experience. Of the three broad stages of human maturation – acquisition, specialization, and integration – the highest level is integrative. In the context of education “the university becomes the center for lifelong learning. Integrative learning experiences take on new meaning and vitality when they are directly connected with the integrative challenges of adult life” (p. 207). Kolb also identified four distinct learning styles – diverging (feeling and watching), assimilating (watching and thinking), converging (doing and thinking), and accommodating (doing and feeling). These learning styles have implications for GED instructors who seek to involve their students in community service.

According to Thoms (2001), certain characteristics of adult learners reflect the theory of experiential learning. These apply to GED preparation students who, for the most part, are adults. Adults do not learn for the sake of learning. They want an immediately useful learning outcome in concrete, practical, and self-benefitting terms. Adults learn best when they use what they already know and integrate new knowledge and skills into their prior knowledge. It is important to adult learners to understand why the learning is useful and why they need to master the new skills. They want some control over their experiences. Adults are unwilling to make mistakes and may compensate by being exact. Because adults acquire psychomotor skills more slowly than younger students, adults need greater opportunity to proceed at their own pace.

These characteristics echo Knowles' assumptions regarding andragogy, which is the teaching of adults. First, teachers have a responsibility to help adult students in the normal movement from dependency toward increasing self-directedness. Second, adults have a constantly growing reservoir of experience that is a rich source of learning. Third, people are ready to learn something when it will help them cope with life's tasks and problems. Fourth, learners see education as a means to develop increased competence. Fifth, adults need to know the reason for learning something. Finally, the most potent motivators for adult learners are internal, such as self-esteem (Knowles, 1970). Participation in community service can provide adult students the venue for recognizing all of Knowles' assumptions.

Mezirow (1996) argued that "mainstream adult literacy has been sanitized from any responsibility for helping learners to engage in critical thinking and reflective discourse or to understand how to take responsible social action as adult citizens of a

democracy” (p. 2). His premise was that adult education had become market driven in the sense that its primary goals were worker productivity and reduction of welfare rolls. He called for adult education for social action by adults who are able to reflect on evidence, to argue conflicting points of view, and to examine assumptions critically.

Brookfield described the type of critical thinking Mezirow alluded to as the best example of lifelong learning (Esterle & Clurman, 1993). He called it a learning process grounded in experience that adults use to interpret experiences in relationships, communities and workplaces. St. Clair (2002) pointed out that, since adult literacy receives federal funds aimed at workforce development, literacy instructional programs must show vocational outcomes. He also noted, however, that the business world’s emphasis on the holistic development of workers has brought an awareness of the need for educating the whole student. GED programs, which are federally funded as part of adult literacy, may focus solely on students’ successful completion of the GED exam. Thus, they neglect the critical-thinking component that can be a significant outcome of experiential learning. By arranging for students the opportunity to participate in volunteer community projects, GED instructors may open an avenue for holistic development that would incorporate critical thinking through experiential learning.

Despite the extensive work of Kolb and others, Boud (1994) argued that earlier literature dealt with the importance of learning from experience but neglected to provide directions as to how to facilitate this type of learning. He described Kolb’s work as “a useful pragmatic device [that is] insufficiently wide ranging” (p. 49). Boud also said that adult-learning literature tended to ignore work done with adults in the field of experiential learning. He proposed a model of learning from experience that included two

basic assumptions. The first is that all learning has its roots in prior experience. For learners to understand what is taking place, they must be able to link the new to the existing knowledge. The second assumption is that learning from experience is active. Learners engage with and intervene in the events in which they participate. Boud's assumptions, too, seem to support the inclusion of participation in community service projects in adult education programs.

Kolb (1984) showed how learning by adults grows out of experience by addressing the matter in the context of higher education:

...as the population in general grows older and the frequency of adult career change continues to increase, the "action" in higher education will be centered around adult learners who demand that the relevance and application of ideas be demonstrated and tested against their accumulated experience and wisdom. (p. 6)

He suggested that this mix of academics and practicality result in both learning and personal development for adult learners. Some critics of experiential learning argue that it can lessen the value of a college education. However, supporters counter that it can provide opportunities in higher education to adults who otherwise would not have access to them (Merriam & Brockett, 1997).

Kolb has other detractors as well. Miettinen (2000) concluded that Kolb did not interpret Dewey's concept of experience and reflective thought adequately. "[T]he concept of experiential learning, in the form used by Kolb and the adult education tradition, represents the kind of psychological reductionism that Dewey considered a misinterpretation of his antidualist conception of experience" (p. 70). Miettinen voiced concern about incorporating experiential learning into adult education by saying that

experiential learning “combines spontaneity, feeling, and deep individual insights with the possibility of rational thought and reflection” (p.70). It also incorporates the central tenet of lifelong learning – that every individual has the capacity to grow and learn. Miettinen called the price of incorporating experiential learning into adult education too high and identified two risks. First, adult education may remain a “quasi-scientific and academic field” without connection to “learning and thought” (p. 71). Second, “the belief in an individual’s capabilities and his individual experience leads us away from the analysis of cultural and social conditions of learning that are essential to any serious enterprise of fostering change and learning in real life” (p. 71).

Garner (2000) identified theoretical limitations in Kolb’s work pointing out that Kolb’s theory has no coherent foundations or clear links to psychology. He argued that there are poor correlations between Kolb’s learning styles and Jung’s typologies which result in contradictory epistemologies. According to Garner, “Jung’s and Kolb’s work do appear to be linked not by the types and styles, but rather that they both represent an idealist approach” (p. 344). Further, he maintained that Kolb’s work does not provide a reliable description of an individual’s learning style. However, he pointed out, “This does not necessarily mean his theory is wrong, but rather it lacks any coherent foundations and clear links to psychology” (p. 347).

Nevertheless, Kolb’s contributions cannot be underestimated. Kelly (1997) said that despite their limitations Kolb presented a model of experience in scientific form which has been instrumental in moving educational thought from focusing on the instructor back to the learner. Participation in community service is a learner-centered

activity that moves the adult student from the theoretical to the practical and has the capacity for tying the practical back to the theoretical.

Another view of experiential learning appears in Fenwick's (2000) work. Fenwick identified what she termed five currents of thought on experiential learning and named them reflection, interference, resistance, co-emergence, and participation. These theories can serve educators in at least two ways: "as prescriptive basis for instructional design and intervention and as descriptive or interpretive tools for understanding learning environments" (p. 245). The participation perspective seems to support the idea of engaging students in community service as part of their education.

Reflection calls upon learners to construct knowledge through participating in and then looking back on their experience. This perspective emphasizes the role of reflection by the learner on the lived experience and is a key aspect of service-learning. Usually, learners reflect by writing about their experiences as well as talking about them. In community service, which is less structured than service-learning, reflection is still an important part of the equation. It may be considerably less formal than the structured reflection activities of a service-learning project. For example it may take the form of a general class discussion. Dewey's theory that current learning is connected to knowledge already acquired and to future potential knowledge suggests that knowledge construction results from linking new experiences with existing knowledge. Learners also construct knowledge and skills through interacting with others and the environment and then reflecting on their experiences (Askov, 2000). One criticism of reflection is that it depersonalizes the learner by "advocating retreat into loftier domains of rational thought from which raw experience can be disciplined and controlled" (Fenwick, 2000, p. 250).

One of the reasons community service may provide a practical learned experience more suited to GED instruction is that the reflection component is less structured than it is in service-learning.

Fenwick (2000) described interference as a psychoanalytic perspective. It addresses, in part, “the tensions between the learner, knowledge, and educator” (p. 250). It is the premise of this perspective that people must experiment willingly and chance confronting traumas in that experimentation (2000). Fenwick pointed out that, Mezirow, on the other hand, argued that learning for adult students is more than working through situations; it is working toward and validating the beliefs they hold.

A third perspective is resistance which revolves around the issue of power. It is the premise that experiential learning can lead to emancipation by emphasizing non-formal learning settings as well as formal classroom settings (Fenwick, 2000). Informal settings are free from the roles of structure and dominance prevalent in organized groups and may help learners escape restraints. According to Fenwick, “With resistance, people can become open to unexpected, unimagined possibilities for work, life, and development” (p. 257). A basic principal guiding the involvement of students in community service is that they have encounters that give them new perspectives on their life options.

Co-emergence is the enactivist perspective of experiential learning which involves the various sensomotor capacities within the human body (Fenwick, 2000). In this perspective educators are communicators, story makers, and interpreters. Thus, educators must be clear about their own interests. Otherwise, ethical issues, which are fundamental to education, may appear (2000). The risk in involving students in

community service in conjunction with their class work is that the service project may reflect the interests of the teacher rather than that of the students. This risk may be even greater with GED students because of their limited educational background.

Participation likely is the perspective to which this study best relates. The theory that supports the participation perspective is that “individuals learn as they participate by interacting with the community...the tools at hand...and the moment’s activity” (Fenwick, 2000, p. 253). Lave and Wenger argued that “knowledge is not a substance to be ingested and then transferred to a new situation but, instead, part of the very process of participation in the immediate situation” (Fenwick, p. 253). This perspective challenges the belief that reflection is crucial to producing knowledge. Service-learning emphasizes the role of reflection in learning. Community service – which is the focus of this study – also involves reflection but of a less formal nature. Some critics of this perspective maintain that when students attempt learning in life situations without supervision, they may simply “reinforce negative practices that the community is trying to eliminate” (p. 255) instead of learning new attitudes. When educators help learners participate in community practices, they give students an opportunity for experiential learning that can facilitate their moving into legitimate roles within the community. The next section will discuss service-learning and volunteer community service.

Community Service and Service-learning

The focus of this inquiry was the influence of participation in volunteer community service on GED preparation students. However, it appears that existing research conducted in this area deals only with students in K-12 systems, colleges, and universities. Further, that research explores a specific kind of community service known

as service-learning. The term is hyphenated to emphasize the connection between the two concepts. Holland and Robinson (2008) estimate that more than one-third of all postsecondary institutions in the United States incorporate service-learning into their instructional programs. Service-learning is not volunteerism or internship. Service-learning combines classroom instruction with community service. It involves students in academic preparation for a project that addresses a local need and engages them in reflection at the project's conclusion. The purpose of service-learning is to benefit both the provider and the recipient (Furco, 1996) while the primary purpose of community service is to benefit the recipient. During a service-learning project, students use their academic skills in commitment to their communities (Robinson, 2004). The goal of service-learning is to help students develop an awareness of the needs of others, both individuals and the community, and a sense of their responsibility for helping meet those needs. Goals of volunteer community service are the same. Furco (1996) described volunteerism as "the engagement of students in activities where the primary emphasis is on the service being provided and the primary intended beneficiary is clearly the service recipient" (p. 3). An example is the visit of a school-based group to a nursing home where outcomes beyond service to the residents are unintentional.

Volunteerism, even when it is part of an educational program, is less structured than service-learning. Service-learning, like volunteer community service, is experiential learning. Learners connect what they are learning to what they already know and what may occur in the future (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000) in a study for the University of California Higher Education Institute determined that service-learning outcomes of civic engagement, personal growth, and

academic achievement are quite similar to the outcomes identified in previous service-learning studies. As to the place of service-learning or community service in education, according to Holland and Robinson (2008)

...postsecondary institutions have moral and civic responsibilities, as well as intellectual reasons, for ensuring that their teaching and research activities are contributing in some direct way to the important questions of the economy, society, culture, health, safety, and the environment. (p. 18)

Service-learning has created seamless education. It merges in-class and out-of-class, academic and non-academic, curricular and co-curricular, and on-campus and off-campus activities in such a way that students use the life experiences to make meaning of the material they study in class. Service-learning as a component of K-12 education emerged in 1983 following a proposal to add one Carnegie unit for high school students who completed 120 hours of community service. The Atlanta Public Schools approved the requirement. State school boards in Washington, Pennsylvania, and Minnesota authorized funding to such local programs. In 1992, Maryland became the first state to make service a requirement for graduation (Denton, 1997-1998). Research to date has linked service-learning to “improved student retention; academic learning...persistence to degree completion; and increases in prosocial behaviors” such as self esteem, motivation, critical thinking, communications skills, and interpersonal relationships (Holland and Robinson, 2008, p. 20).

Even though service-learning proponents generally have ignored adult literacy students, the concept does have proponents for its use in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). Glicker (2006) pointed out that when service-learning is integrated into

adult ESL classes, the students have a chance for involvement in their community and become more accountable as participants in the democratic process that helps build society. Kong (2005) echoed Glicker in saying that non-citizens have many opportunities to become involved in civic participation – volunteer in a community organization, participate in a march or a rally, or contribute money to a cause or candidate. Involvement helps forestall their being marginalized. Everything in both Glicker's and Kong's articles could be applied to teaching GED preparation students in general literacy classes, yet the Glicker and Kong have focused solely on ESL students.

A unique aspect of service-learning not appearing in volunteer community service is that the students involved must produce a tangible benefit to the community while applying the skills they acquired in the classroom. Service-learning is an approach to teaching and learning that can be integrated into any subject area as long as the project is compatible with learning goals. It works for all age groups (Fiske, 2002). Community service often is mistaken for service-learning; however, a project meets the service-learning criteria only when it uses and clarifies course content (Richardson, 2006). Community service may or may not grow directly out of course content. Another, and probably the most significant difference, in service-learning and volunteer community service is the element of reflection. Eyler and Giles (1999) described reflection as the hyphen in service-learning because it ties the student service experience to academic learning. Through structured reflecting, students who have engaged in service-learning activities think about their experience. Structured reflection is an aspect of service-learning that could limit opportunities for GED preparation students to participate in service-learning. These students may not remain in the GED program long enough to be

able to reflect in the classroom on their experience. Volunteer community service does not depend on the formal reflection aspect as service learning does, and, therefore, may be the better option for GED students than service-learning. Yet a concerned GED instructor should facilitate students in reflecting on their community service experience inside the classroom and encourage them to do so in settings beyond the classroom.

Laudable though service-learning appears at first glance, it has not escaped some fairly significant opposition to its inclusion in schools – both from the inside and the outside of the educational setting. Morgan (2002) in his doctoral dissertation at Indiana University gives a variety of reasons why service-learning is not always welcomed with open arms. For example, school administrators sometimes hesitate to take on what they see as the burden of providing service-learning opportunities because of time and financial restraints. Grant funds are available, especially from federal sources. However, these grants come with numerous strings attached and involve relatively little money for the amount of work required to obtain them. Further, rules, regulations, reporting requirements, and even mandatory meetings can be overwhelming to teachers unaccustomed to grant administration. Time, also, is a consideration. For a project to be valid as service-learning it must be a legitimate part of a class and thus consume class time. Yet another issue may be legal liability to the school for the safety of the students away from the campus on a school-sponsored activity. One way schools can protect themselves to some degree is by having students sign a waiver of liability.

Yet another criticism of service-learning is that it can reflect the attitude of the privileged doing good for the less fortunate. Therefore, it is imperative that the learners be aware of the point of view of those they are helping (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, &

Yee, 2000). This same attitude could arise in those who perform volunteer community service.

The concept of service-learning is based on the theory that the projects link learning to citizenship. While students participate in service-learning, they are functioning as citizens and at the same time acquiring knowledge and skills that will prepare them for later civic participation (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Students feel that applying what they study in class to real situations motivates them to look for solutions to some of the problems they encounter (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000).

Since social problem solving draws on the civic capacity to recognize, frame, and address a problem, higher education needs to pay attention to the problem-solving capabilities of college graduates to sustain their involvement in their communities (Eyler & Giles, 1999). GED students, too, often have the same problem-solving capabilities. The data Eyler and Giles have collected on change in college students as a result of involvement in service-learning projects show an increased willingness to participate in service and a growth in ability to solve problems structured in an unfamiliar way (1999). Service-learning also proves an ideal environment to connect student development to Eyler and Giles' five dimensions of effective citizenship – values, knowledge, skills, efficacy, and commitment.

Feeling connected to the community provides motivation for involvement. Service-learning gives students that sense of connectedness. It also can impact their understanding of social issues, social justice, and need for political change. Students see the value of volunteering, especially when they reflect on the service-learning activity in which they participated. It also can teach them to identify practical strategies for social

change. Students who participate in service-learning gain an understanding of how a community can help itself. Further, they are more likely to enter a career involving service than are those who have not had a service-learning experience (Eyler & Giles, 1999). It does not seem likely that the absence of the structured reflection component from volunteer service would prevent students from gaining an understanding of the community or entering a service career, but it also might enhance their learning.

On the other hand, Denson, Vogelgesang, and Saenz (2005), in their study on the idea of preparing students for civic engagement throughout life, concluded that empirical studies on civic engagement have not examined service-learning as it could impact a student's being politically engaged after college. Nevertheless, they see that the pedagogy of service-learning has come to be viewed as a way of involving students in civic engagement at a young age. Their findings support Eyler and Giles' 1999 assertions that service-learning potentially can foster civic values, skills, and self-efficacy. Evidence suggests that service-learning may be essential to responding to the needs and preferences of adult students, encouraging them to further learning, and giving learning activities real-life purposes (Holland and Robinson, 2008).

GED Preparation Students in Georgia

The American Council on Education's report for 2005, which contains the most recent figures available, shows that nationally 39.7 million adults lack a high school diploma or its equivalent. Of that population, 1.2 million live in Georgia ("*Who passed,*" 2006). The 68,558 students whom Georgia's adult literacy program served in 2007 are a relative few compared to the total number of students nationwide in need of adult literacy

services. Adult literacy students often come from what may be considered disadvantaged circumstances. Beder (1991) determined the following:

...there is a strong relationship between adult illiteracy and low socioeconomic status as defined by income, occupational status, and educational attainment.

However defined, the adult literacy population is poorer, less educated, and employed in jobs of lower status than the general population.... The lower the socioeconomic status, the lower the rate of participation [in educational pursuits].

(p. 24)

A report from the National Center for Educational Statistics shows that in 2005 the high school drop-out rate for students living in low-income families was approximately six times the rate of that for students from high-income families (Laird, Kienzl, DeBell, & Chapman, 2007). These are the people who, after withdrawing from high school, often become students in adult education classes.

Students enrolled in classes that help them prepare for the General Educational Development exam make up a specific student population that is part neither of the K-12 system nor colleges and universities. In Georgia, free, public GED preparation is an aspect of the adult education program administered by the Technical College System of Georgia. Even with limited research, it is possible to develop a snapshot of adult literacy students. Georgia's student demographics for 2007 are in line with national trends Beder (1991) identified dating back at least twenty years. The Georgia Adult Learner Information System (GALIS) database came into use for the first time in fiscal year 2007. The reports from that year show that 68,558 people attended state-sponsored adult literacy classes. The majority of those – 26,871 – were between 25 and 44 years of age.

The fewest – 1,124 – were age 60 and above. The largest racial group consisted of African-American females. The largest number of students working at the 0-8 grade levels – 13,606 – was between the ages of 25 and 44. Most students working at the traditional high-school level of grades 9-12 were between 16 and 18 (GALIS, 2007).

The two tables that follow provide additional demographic information on adult literacy students. Table 1 identifies the three basic programs within adult literacy – Adult Basic Education with four distinctions between the academic skills levels of zero and eighth grade ninth month, Adult Secondary Education with two distinctions between the levels of ninth grade and twelfth grade ninth month, and English as a Second Language (ESL) also referred to as English Literacy. The table shows how many students at what age are participating in each program. It is interesting to note that the younger the students the higher the educational functioning level at which they entered the program.

Table 1

Number of Students Enrolled in Each Program by Age Group

Program Type	16-18	19-24	25-44	45-59	60 +	Total
Adult Basic Education	12,362	12,951	13,606	3,787	588	43,294
Adult Secondary Ed	2,526	1,713	1,320	282	78	5,919
ESL	529	3,982	11,945	2,431	458	19,345
TOTAL	15,417	18,646	26,871	6,500	1,124	68,558

The second table breaks out the participant information by age, ethnicity, and gender. The column labeled “other” holds combined statistics on American Indians, Alaskan natives, native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders.

Table 2

Number of Students by Age, Ethnicity, and Gender

Ages	Asian	Afr.Amer.	Hispanics	Caucasian	Other	
TOTAL						
M – male; F - female						
16-18	M - 80 F - 59	M - 3,728 F - 2,600	M - 595 F - 492	M - 4,165 F - 3,574	M - 73 F - 51	15,417
19-24	M - 190 F - 242	M - 4,224 F - 3,626	M - 2,254 F - 1,926	M - 2,994 F - 3,058	M - 72 F - 60	18,646
25-44	M - 476 F - 1,108	M - 3,660 F - 4,841	M - 4,228 F - 6,100	M - 2,598 F - 3,672	M - 78 F - 110	26,871
45-59	M - 203 F - 454	M - 823 F - 1,753	M - 583 F - 1,024	M - 626 F - 983	M - 21 F - 30	6,500
60+	M - 75 F - 96	M - 138 F - 249	M - 82 F - 125	M - 134 F - 220	M - 3 F - 2	1,124
TOTAL	M -1,024 F -1,959	M -12,573 F -13,069	M - 7,742 F - 9,667	M - 10,517 F - 11,507	M - 247 F - 253	68,558

(GALIS, 2007)

The figures in Table 2 show that the largest group of adult literacy students in Georgia during fiscal year 2007 consisted of Hispanic women between the ages of 25 and 44 followed by African-American women in the same age range. In all ethnic groups between ages 16 and 18, more males attended adult literacy classes than females. The same holds true from ages 19 to 24 among African-Americans, Hispanics, and others; however, there are more Asian and Caucasian females than males in this group. The trend in students over age 25 was for more females to attend adult literacy classes than males. In total numbers Georgia's adult literacy programs served more African-Americans than any other ethnic group. African-Americans made up 39 % of the statewide student body compared to 32 % Caucasians and 25 % Hispanics. Adult literacy programs also served more females than males by 1,000 to 2,000 students in every ethnic group except "other."

GED students who are enrolled in Georgia programs frequently come from disadvantaged circumstances. Beder (1991) determined that the relationship between adult literacy and low socioeconomic status is strong. Adult literacy students generally are poorer, less educated, and employed in jobs of lower status than the general population. GED preparation students, like all adult students, enroll in classes with certain goals in mind. Theirs is specifically the attainment of a GED diploma. According to Greive (2003), adult students know where they want to go, can be demanding consumers, and most of all want to be treated as adults. GED students left the K-12 system for a variety of reasons. One reason may be that most schools exercise authority to control students. Another may be that they support some students but not others (Beder, 1991).

Many GED students are active volunteers in their churches and their children's schools. Having withdrawn from high school without graduating, though, they may have missed the opportunity to engage in learning-related volunteer service as part of their education. Volunteer community service can provide GED students with the kind of concrete experience that hands-on learning advocates propose. Helping build a Habitat for Humanity house or working in voter registration gives students experience that they cannot get by reading about these activities in a textbook. Involvement in the real needs of other people has potential for bringing learning to life for GED students. The larger issue, however, is whether it will exert an influence on their lives.

Research on Student Participation in Volunteer Community Service

Advocates identify three specific outcomes of service-learning – improved academic performance, enhanced self-efficacy, and increased civic engagement (Eyler &

Giles, 1999). Although research has focused specifically on service-learning, it is conceivable that participation in volunteer community service could have the same effects on GED preparation students.

The first and second questions of this inquiry – what do GED students learn by participating in volunteer community service and how do GED students view learning after participating in volunteer community service – are related to the issue of participants' growth as learners as a result of service-learning. GED preparation students do not receive grades as such in their course work, but they do advance through progressively higher levels of academic skills. According to Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, and Benson (2006), students who began volunteering in seventh to ninth grades had “significantly higher grade point averages in high school than those who never volunteered” (p. 43). They concluded that “if meaningful participation has any role in contributing to school success, then service experiences are important because they are a key source of such opportunities” (p. 44). If, as they pointed out, community service and service-learning have a greater impact on lower income, minority, and at-risk students, it would appear that GED preparation students – many of whom are from just these circumstances – would benefit as much and in the same manner. Further, they contended that “service learning may have a greater influence among socioeconomically disadvantaged students on the constellation of factors that affect academic success” (p. 55). The third research question this inquiry explored is how has participation in volunteer community service affected GED students' civic engagement.

Summary

The related literature provides a background and rationale for research into the influence of participation in volunteer community service on GED preparation students. It illuminates the philosophical and theoretical foundations which are rooted in the works of Dewey who saw education as linking learning to existing knowledge. This idea is expanded in the experiential learning theory of Kolb who maintained that people construct knowledge by interacting with and participating in the community.

Volunteer community service is linked to service-learning by the similarities between the two. Research has shown that service learning increases civic engagement, enhances self-esteem, and improves academic performance of participants. However, little if any research has been done on similar effects of volunteer community service. Further, research has focused on students in the K-12 system, colleges, and universities to the exclusion of GED preparation students. This study will attempt to help fill that gap in the knowledge by researching the issue of participation in community service as it may influence GED preparation students.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the influence of participation in volunteer community service on GED preparation students. When adults enter General Educational Development classes, they usually focus on acquiring just enough education to pass the GED exam as quickly as possible and move on with their lives. Respecting that goal, GED teachers usually rely solely on traditional classroom instruction. This teaching style helps a student acquire the requisite knowledge for success on the GED exam, but it may not educate the whole person. Participation as volunteers in community service projects can provide a venue for expanding the education GED students receive in the classroom by giving them the opportunity to learn in real-world situations. I addressed this issue by interviewing GED preparation students concerning their experience as community volunteers. The research questions developed in an effort to discover the influence of participation in volunteer community service on these students are as follows:

1. What do students learn from participating in volunteer community service?
2. How do students view learning after participating in volunteer community service?
3. How has volunteering affected their self-efficacy?

This chapter is divided into six sections – design of the study, sample selection, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability, researcher bias and assumptions.

Design of the Study

Despite the push for quantitative research even in adult education, the need for evidence-based qualitative research remains. Qualitative research is based on the assumption that meaning grows out of the interaction of people with their world. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not begin with the premise that reality is fixed and measurable. Qualitative research assumes that meaning fluctuates and changes (Merriam, 2002). The aim of the qualitative dissertation in education is to provide insight into educational phenomena in particular contexts (Piantanida & Garman, 1999). A quantitative design ignores these contexts which include such outcomes as economic and social benefits. These outcomes are addressed in this qualitative study. The purpose of this study was to understand the influence of participation in volunteer community service projects on GED preparation students. The inquiry results offer some insight into this phenomenon.

A qualitative study may grow out of the absence of theory to explain or clarify a phenomenon. The researcher begins with an open-ended gathering of data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories inductively. Researchers gather information from the field through intuitive understandings and observations (Merriam & Associates, 2002). This inquiry, in seeking to help fill a gap in the knowledge of the effects of volunteerism, followed this procedure.

The product of qualitative research is filled with rich, thick description. Word-pictures of participants, context, and activities serve as guides to the conclusions. Schwandt (2001) defines thick description as interpretive description. Instead of being an amassing of details, thick description is a record of the meanings, circumstances,

intentions, strategies, and motivations surrounding an episode. The words, not numbers as in quantitative research, convince the reader that the findings are valid. Data may include direct quotations from documents, field notes, participant interviews, videotapes, electronic communication, or a combination of all. The idea is to make sense of phenomena from the participant's point of view. In short, the qualitative research project is a search for meaning and understanding (Merriam & Associates, 2002). This study sought to understand the meaning that the GED students who were the interview participants made of their volunteer community service.

According to Merriam (2002), "If you want to understand a phenomenon, uncover the meaning of a situation for those involved, or delineate a process (how things happen), then a qualitative design would be the most appropriate" (p. 11). The purpose of this study was to understand the influence of participation in volunteer community service on GED preparation students. The research explored four areas. Specifically, the questions delved into the issues of knowledge acquired by the participant, the participant's view of self as a learner, the participant's self-efficacy, and the participant's civic awareness. An interpretive qualitative approach to uncover the meaning for those involved seemed most likely to produce information that would address these issues.

Qualitative research is inductive. The researcher is the instrument of the inquiry. The researcher and interview participants are better choices as instruments than paper-and-pencil because nonhuman instruments are not adaptable enough to adjust to the variety of realities that may appear (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the case of this project, qualitative research based on interviews produced a clearer picture of the interview participants' thoughts and feelings than quantitative research could.

Sample Selection

The participants in this research project were GED preparation students at three small two-year colleges in rural Georgia. I am the dean of adult education at one of the colleges. I knew that one of the teachers I supervise has involved her students in volunteer community service for several years. I chose her students as interview participants to find out how volunteer community service influenced students in our program. To find additional students to interview, I contacted other adult education program administrators. From those who responded, I chose programs in two colleges that have a reputation for community service.

All interview participants were at least three months removed from the community service projects in which they took part. In this time, the participants had the opportunity provided by time and space to reflect on the experience and continue in community service if they wished. These participants attended GED classes at these three different colleges and were students in classes taught by three different teachers. Because most students who attend GED classes do so of their own volition, none of these teachers required volunteer community service of her students. As a rule, the teachers suggested and helped coordinate the volunteer community service activities, frequently tying them to such holidays as Thanksgiving and Christmas. One teacher used National Literacy Day, celebrated annually in September, as a springboard for volunteer community service activity. They reported that a majority of their students participated in the community service projects. While some students were eager to take part, others joined in because of peer pressure. Each of the teachers reported some of the same

reasons for involving her students in community service, but each also added some variety to her approach. As a result, students interviewed had a variety of experiences.

One teacher who has involved her students in volunteer community service for a year said that her particular interest was in directing the community's point of view from the stereotypical deficit model of the GED student to the student strengths model. She said that most people in the area where her class meets look down on her GED students. Among the community service projects she has involved her students in are reading to children in the pre-kindergarten program and filling and delivering Thanksgiving baskets for the elderly. She said that in addition to contributing to her students' sense of community needs, she hoped that their participation in community service would help improve their self-efficacy.

A teacher at another of the three colleges has used community service as part of the way she has taught GED students for about eight years. Under her guidance, her students have volunteered in Even Start classes, read to elementary school students, read stories and poems at a downtown Christmas celebration, and tutored lower-level students in the adult education program. Her stated purpose when she began the activity was to give her students the opportunity to see community needs and learn that they could make a difference. Because her class meets in a building located about four miles from the nearest town, she and her students have to work out the logistics of transportation. Her students generally solve the problem by planning and traveling in car pools.

The GED teacher at the third college has been engaging her students in community service for six years. She said that she has a strong belief in volunteerism for personal enrichment. However, she learned that her students, who attend GED classes in

a very rural setting, had no concept of working for free. They even asked her why anyone would want to do so. She said that she helped them get involved in community service to help them see community needs but to give them personal opportunities as well. The class meets in a building that also houses other community agencies where the GED students have volunteered by unloading trucks and distributing food commodities. She said that she hoped the practical nature of their volunteer service would increase their self confidence. She said that she showed the students how they could use the experience for resume support by identifying their experience in teamwork and leadership roles.

In this study, I was the instrument of the inquiry. I used a purposeful, or criterion-based, method of selection to identify and recruit interview participants. According to Patton (2002), criterion-based sampling involves picking all cases that meet certain criteria. In this case, the first and most important criterion was that the interview participants were GED preparation students. The primary criteria were (a) the participants' current or previous enrollment in GED preparation classes, (b) their participation in at least one volunteer community service project while enrolled in the program, and (c) their being separated by at least three months from the service activity so that they will be able to evaluate their experience by reflecting on it. I also sought diversity in age, race, and gender among participants. The interviews revealed what influence participation in volunteer community service had on the interview participants.

Opportunistic, or emergent, sampling complemented criterion-based sampling. This type of sampling allowed me the option of adding to the sample as opportunities arose after fieldwork began. Patton (2002) said that being open to follow wherever data

lead is a major strength of qualitative fieldwork strategies. My being alert to such opportunities served to help me gather a higher quality of research data.

I asked and received from GED instructors help in locating former students and in identifying any students still in the program who participated in volunteer community service at least three months before the interviews took place. I reviewed student demographics available in the program database in an effort to locate 10 to 20 people to interview individually. I had arranged for 15 interviews but reached saturation with 11 interviews. Fewer participants likely would not have provided enough varied viewpoints.

Data Collection

Of the three types of qualitative data collection – observing, analyzing documents, and interviewing – interviewing was the best choice for understanding the influence of participation in volunteer community service on GED preparation students. The initial assumption of qualitative interviewing is that others' perspectives are meaningful and understandable. Interviewing provides a vehicle for exploring another's mind and gathering stories (Patton, 2002). Qualitative interviewing offers an avenue of in-depth exploration of an interviewee's experience and, possibly, insight (Charmaz, 2006). The focus of this study was to explore GED students' experience in volunteer community service and to gain insight to the influence of that experience on the participants.

Patton (2002) discussed three basic approaches to qualitative interviewing. The first is the informal, conversational interview. This type of interview is a "spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction" (p. 342). This type of interviewing often occurs as a researcher is involved in participant observation. It does not depend on a predetermined set of questions. Rather, the questions emerge as

conversations progress. The strength of this interview style is its very flexibility and responsiveness to change. Its weakness, however, is that collecting enough information may take longer. Additionally, analyzing the information to find patterns may be more difficult because of the variety of responses different questions will elicit.

The second type of interviewing Patton (2002) identified is the general interview guide, or semi-structured, approach. The guide is a list of questions the interviewer will ask or issues the interviewer will explore with the participants. Such interviews are systematic and comprehensive because the researcher has determined in advance what issues need exploring. An interview guide can be as detailed as the interviewer wants depending on that person's ability to specify important issues before the interview. The guide provides the interviewer with a framework in which to develop questions, organize the questions, and decide the depth of probing appropriate to each question.

The third type is the standard, open-ended interview, which is highly structured. Each participant receives exactly the same questions in exactly the same order. The probes occur in exactly the same way in exactly the same places in the questioning. It is valuable especially when two or more people conduct the interviews (2002). However, it is too structured for this study. In this case, I believe I was able to elicit better responses with a semi-structured and somewhat less formal approach.

Interviewing for this project combined the semi-structured with the informal, conversational interview. This intensive interviewing approach was expected to reveal the participants' interpretation of their experience in volunteering. Charmaz (2006) said that intensive interviewing "permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience" (p. 25). Thus, this type of interviewing enabled me to explore the topic from

the participants' point of view. An interview guide outlined in advance the issues for the interview; however, informal probing followed the guided questions. The informal interview took the form of a conversation between the interviewer and the participant (deMarrais, 2004). Combining the two types of interviewing allowed me to focus on the subject and ask additional, deeper questions that increased the richness of the data. The best format seemed to be opening the interview with a conversational approach, moving to the predetermined questions, and switching back to the informal style for probing (Patton, 2002). According to Schwandt (2001), informality in interviews allows "the most flexibility and responsiveness to emerging issues" (p. 135). The informal beginning also provided me with the opportunity to help participants be comfortable with the interviews. Encouragement and a good rapport with the interviewer can lead participants to reveal information that otherwise would not be available to the interviewer (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Informality in the opening segment of the interview helped establish such rapport with participants in this study. Once they were comfortable, I could move more easily into the predetermined questions. Their answers to the predetermined questions guided me in probing for thicker, richer data. The questions in my interview guide appear in Appendix A. The consent form students signed to participate in the study appears in Appendix B.

I also looked for secondary sources of information describing the participants' community-service experience. I expected that, if they had kept journals, they would be willing to share their thoughts. However, I did not find any among the interview participants who kept journals. Some participants discussed their experience in written

assignments as part of their work in their GED classes. Newspaper articles and a television station publicized the projects in which some students were involved.

Data Analysis

All research has five processes in common: (a) identifying the problem, (b) establishing the conceptual framework, (c) delineating the research phenomenon, (d) determining the methodology and gathering data, and (e) analyzing the data (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Data analysis in this case employed the constant comparative method. Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection and helped me answer the research questions posed in this study. However, the constant comparative method does not “guarantee that two analysts working independently with the same data will achieve the same conclusions” (Glaser, 1965, p. 438). Instead, its purpose is “generating and plausibly suggesting ... many properties ... about a general phenomenon” (p. 438). Interviewing, which I employed, is one method of data collection in qualitative research that lent itself to the constant comparative method of data analysis. The stages of the constant comparative method include comparing incidents applicable to each category and integrating categories and their properties (1965).

I began by coding incidents into categories and then comparing them to other incidents within the category. In this stage I coded information derived from interviews and used memos to clarify the coding. The second step I employed was to compare incidents to the properties of the category into which I coded the interview information. The third step was identifying tentative findings. I reviewed the purpose of the study and the research questions that guided the inquiry on a regular basis to remain on track with the inquiry. Findings, to be credible, must be well supported by data and well integrated

and clear. The supporting data, integration, and clarity will determine whether the findings are understood and accepted by others in my field, which in this case is adult literacy. I did not write theory. Rather, I presented “enough material to facilitate comprehension” (Glaser, 443) and to find answers to the research questions in the form of categories, properties, and themes inductively derived from the data.

Validity and Reliability

The usefulness of data generated depends on the quality of the interviews I conducted. Validity, too, can be a concern. As a qualitative researcher, I could not depend on numerical data for support of my findings. No established significance level signals a meaningful finding as it does in the process of quantitative research. The qualitative researcher is the ultimate authority on the perspective he or she has developed on the gathered data (Worthen, 2002).

However, consumers of research need reassurance that the study which produced the information is credible. Credibility or its absence exists in two areas – internal and external. The level of the congruence of a study’s findings with reality is the determinant of internal validity (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Particularly through the use of interviews for data collection, I – as the primary research instrument for this study – interpreted another person’s interpretation of events. I used two methods for seeking internal validity in this study. The first was the member check. According to Cho and Trent (2006), the process is one in which the tentative findings are “played back” to the participant for perceived accuracy and reactions. In this study, this process involved taking my interpretations of data back to interview participants for them to review. The

reason for the member check is that if the interpretation is valid, the participants should recognize their experiences in the researcher's words (Merriam & Associates, 2002).

The second internal validity check valuable for this study was peer review. In this process the researcher engages colleagues to review and comment on the plausibility of the emerging findings (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). As part of my peer review, I received input from two other doctoral candidates. The four members of my dissertation committee conducted the final peer review.

External validity is the extent to which the study's findings will generalize to other situations. However, external validation is not the responsibility of the researcher. It is the responsibility of the consumer of the research to decide whether the inquiry's findings are applicable in another setting (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Thick descriptions will aid the consumer in this process.

Reliability addresses the question of the extent to which a study can be reproduced with the same findings as the original. However, when applied to human behavior, the question becomes moot. Because people are not static in their behavior, the replication of a study with exactly the same results is unlikely. Nevertheless, the inability to replicate a study does not render its results worthless. What is important in a qualitative study is that the results make sense in light of the data collected (Merriam & Associates, 2002). In this study, the same peer review that insured internal validation addressed reliability.

Assumptions and Researcher Bias

Researchers such as Dewey (1897) and Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis (1999) have indicated that adults learn best through hands-on experiences. Further, some of the

studies available on service-learning and volunteer community service have reported that involvement in these hands-on projects has helped students become more aware of their civic responsibility, has contributed to their self efficacy, and has changed their view of themselves as learners (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, & Benson, 2006). Studies on the influence of participation in volunteer community service on GED preparation students appear to be missing from the literature. I believe that GED students have experienced similar positive effects from their involvement in community service. In an effort to determine whether my assumption is correct, I interviewed GED preparation students who took part in volunteer community service projects.

A growing body of literature attests to the fact that inquiry cannot be value-free. Values determine what researchers study, how they study it, and how they interpret results (Lincoln & Guba, 1999). Personal experiences in volunteer service have helped shape my values and led me to believe that GED students experience similar personal growth from their service. At the outset of my data collection, I recognized and acknowledged that bias. Since some of the student interview participants know me, although not well, they might have tried to figure out what answers I wanted. Thus, I had to pay attention to the answers I received from them so I could guard carefully against attempting to elicit the “right” answers to my interview questions. One method of checking that I employed was to read the first two or three transcripts carefully to identify any leading questions I may have asked inadvertently and remove them from my subsequent interviewing. I also included in my consent form a disclaimer that I cannot affect the students’ progress in GED preparation classes on the basis of the answers to the interview questions. A copy of the consent form is included as Appendix B.

Summary

Chapter 3 describes the methods I used to explore the influence of participation in volunteer community service on GED preparation students. The chapter outlines the design of the study, which is qualitative, and requires the researcher to be the instrument of the inquiry. The explanation of the sample selection indicates that it will be criterion based. I chose interviewing, both semi-structured and open-ended, as the method of data collection. I conducted constant-comparative analysis of data as I collected it. The chapter also addresses the issues of validity, reliability, assumptions, and researcher bias.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the influence of participation in volunteer community service on GED preparation students. The inquiry was intended to address the following questions:

1. What did students learn by participating in volunteer community service?
2. How do students view learning after participating in volunteer community service?
3. How has volunteering affected their civic engagement?

Initially, the research questions were as follows:

1. What do GED students learn by participating in volunteer community service?
2. How do GED students view themselves as learners after participating in volunteer community service?
3. How does participation in volunteer community service affect GED students' self-efficacy?
4. How does participation in volunteer community service affect GED students' civic engagement?

However, analysis of the interview transcripts showed that the data suggested that the four questions be collapsed into three.

This chapter will highlight the 11 GED students who participated in this study and present findings that resulted from an analysis of their responses to interview questions.

The Participants

All 11 of the interview participants were students in GED programs in three two-year colleges in rural Georgia. As dean of adult education at one of these colleges, I knew that one of the teachers I supervise involved her students in volunteer community service projects on a regular basis. Some of the interview participants were students in her classes. To expand the pool of possible interview participants, I contacted adult education program administrators in other colleges and asked for the names of other GED instructors who made community service part of their students' experience. From their responses, I chose two colleges in addition to my own that have GED programs with reputations for community service. I originally planned to interview at least 15 students. The instructors in the three colleges had identified a total of 15 students and said that they felt they could set up interviews for me with more if I needed them. However, by analyzing data as I collected it, I found that I had reached saturation with 11 students. I returned to two of the interview participants with my interpretations of their data. Neither expressed reservations about what I had written.

I interviewed all of the students face-to-face. As indicated in chapter 3, all of the participants were at least 18 years old and removed by no less than three months from the volunteer community service activity in which they participated. I gave all of them pseudonyms to protect their identity. The range of volunteer projects included reading to young children, painting a non-profit organization's office, working in a blood drive, boxing commodities for distribution at a senior citizens' center, raising awareness of the needs of tornado victims, and distributing GED recruitment fliers to parade onlookers.

All the students said that they became involved in their respective volunteer projects at the suggestion of their teachers. All emphasized that they were not pressured in any way by their teachers. The group was diverse in age, race, and gender. It consisted of six females and five males. Six were Caucasian and five African-American. Four Caucasians were female and two male. Three African-Americans were male and two female. The youngest participant was 18 and the oldest 62. The average age of the participants was 30.

Table 3

Demographics of Interview Participants

NAME	AGE	GENDER	RACE	TIME IN GED BEFORE INTERVIEW	VOLUNTEER PROJECT	PREVIOUS VOLUNTEER SERVICE
Mike	18	M	A	8 months	Painting; packing food boxes; working in blood drive	No
Matt	21	M	C	1 year	Reading to children	No
Nicole	39	F	C	1 year	Reading to children	Yes
Mary	62	F	A	5 years	Marching in parade	Yes
Katie	19	F	C	4 months	Reading to children	No
Ashton	20	F	C	10 months	Reading to children	No
Alexis	27	F	A	2.5 years	Reading to children	No
Jimmy	54	M	A	10 years	Giving books to children	No
Allie	30	F	C	1 year	Helping tornado victims	No
John	22	M	A	5 months	Painting; packing commodities boxes	No
Rusty	18	M	C	2 years	Packing commodities boxes	No

Individual Participants

Mike. Mike was 18 years old at the time of the interview and had spent about eight months attending GED class. He has never been a high school student. Instead, of going to high school, he enlisted in the Georgia National Guard Youth Challenge Program. He took and passed the GED exam before our interview. Although he knew some of the GED students when he enrolled, he felt that he made new friends in the class. He has been involved in several volunteer projects with his classmates. He helped paint a community service center office, distributed commodities at a food bank, and worked in a blood drive. His plans were to get a job and possibly to attend college. Mike was friendly and cooperative but a little shy about speaking into the microphone.

Matt. Matt, 21, had been a GED student off and on for about a year when I interviewed him. His slight frame encased a bundle of energy. He took part in a volunteer community service project in which GED students went to pre-kindergarten classes and read to the children. He was excited about sharing his new experience in volunteering and was animated throughout the interview. Matt enrolled in GED class because he understood that he could not get a good job without at least a GED. He had not taken any part of the GED exam at the time of the interview but planned to begin testing in January 2009. He said that his ambition is to be a transportation broker with his father. They do not own trucks; they line up product deliveries for independent truck drivers. He referred to this as “the transportation department.” He used the word “department” to refer to the GED program as well.

Nicole. When I interviewed Nicole, she was 39 and the mother of a young daughter with special needs. Nicole had started attending GED classes several years

earlier while she was pregnant with her daughter. However, her child's illnesses forced her to withdraw. She said she had been cleaning houses but people stopped hiring her because of economic conditions. Realizing that she needed at least a GED to get a job, she returned to school. In GED class, she met many people and made friends. She referred to her class as "a family." Nicole was soft-spoken and reserved. The community service project in which she volunteered was reading to children in a pre-K program. It was her first time as a volunteer, and the experience helped her set her goal to become a teacher of young children.

Mary. Mary was 62 years old and eager to share her thoughts and feelings in an interview about her volunteer service. She had been in and out of GED classes since 2003. She entered technical college first by enrolling in computer classes but realized that she needed to improve her basic skills to be successful. One of her concerns was her ability to pronounce words correctly so that she could communicate better. She had been a factory worker for most of her life when the two manufacturing plants where she was employed closed to send their work off-shore. At the time of the interview, she drove a school bus for the local board of education. Her GED instructor allowed her to attend classes around her work schedule. She is a veteran volunteer having helped in community service projects with her church and a local chapter of a civic organization. Her favorite, though, was participating with other class members walking in a local parade and distributing GED program recruitment flyers to parade onlookers. Her excitement about the GED program and her recruitment efforts shone in her effervescent responses.

Katie. Katie began attending GED classes in August 2008. When I interviewed her, she was 19 and the mother of a 1-year-old boy. He was enrolled in the Even Start

child-care program where Katie and others in her GED class participated in a volunteer community service project. The class sold lemonade to faculty and other students on the campus and used the money they made to buy children's books. They then went as a class to the local Even Start, a publicly funded child-care program for children ages 0 to 4 years, and read to the children there. Katie was involved with Even Start through meetings with other parents whose circumstances were similar to hers. She said that she quit high school because she had fallen behind in her studies. She felt that her teachers would not help her catch up with the other students. She described herself as having been in "a hard situation" having a baby and no high school diploma. An attractive but quiet young woman, she frequently searched for words as she shared her thoughts in the interview.

Ashton. Ashton was nervous at first about participating in a taped interview but opened up and became animated as the interview progressed. She was 20 years old and planned to enter the Job Corps. She enrolled in the GED program because the only work she could find was in a fast-food restaurant or a grocery store. She had been attending GED classes for 10 months at the time of the interview. Even though she wanted her GED, she said she was not serious about her GED studies at first because she was too involved in what she called her "reality life outside of school to be involved in school." She described herself as having had a "rough life." She said that she had always wanted to be a nurse. She spoke highly of her GED instructor who had encouraged her by telling her that she could do anything if she worked hard. Ashton took part as a volunteer in a community service project that involved reading to children at the local Even Start center. She said that, not having children, she knew little about Even Start. Nevertheless, she

enjoyed the visit there and described herself as “just a big kid.” She laughed as she related an episode in which one of the little boys ate the crown that was part of her costume. “It was made of paper,” she said. “I let him hold it, and he ate it.”

Alexis. When I interviewed Alexis, she was on the verge of taking her GED test. At 27, she had attended GED classes off and on for two-and-a-half years. She was referred to the GED program by mental health services. She said she wants her GED diploma so she will not be, as she put it, “labeled.” The accomplishments of which she is proudest are having her learner’s license and practicing driving. She said that when she gets her driver’s license, her brother will give her a car. She had her volunteer experience with the children at the local Even Start center. One thing that the experience taught Alexis is that she does not want to work with children. The reason she gave is that she wants “better for herself.” During the interview, she spoke slowly and had some trouble articulating her answers.

Jimmy. Jimmy, who was 54 at the time of the interview, had been attending GED classes for more than 10 years. He had progressed slowly but continued to attend classes faithfully. He described himself as shy but was eager to talk about his volunteer community service experience. He answered the questions deliberately making a conscious effort for his answers to be clear and understandable. He said that he learned to read and write in the GED program. He went with his class on a visit to an elementary school where some of the class members read to the children and others distributed books to them. Jimmy was one who gave out books. He enthusiastically described visiting classrooms and enjoying snacks with the children. He wants to visit the classroom again, and he said that if he has opportunity to do so, he plans to be one of the readers.

Allie. Allie had passed her GED exam not long before the interview and was no longer attending classes. She had earned her diploma in just under a year of studying with her instructor. When she came to the class site on the day of the interview, she was 30 years old. Several months earlier, while she was a GED student, she and her two small children were living at a substance abuse rehabilitation facility. When a tornado struck the facility, she and her children along with several other women and children lost all their possessions. Her GED instructor organized a community service project for the students to volunteer in collecting clothes and other items for the residents. Allie, who was one of the tornado victims, also became a volunteer – even appearing on a local television station to plead the case of the women.

John. I interviewed John when he had been in the GED program five months. He was 22 and new at volunteering. Soon after enrolling in GED class, he helped paint the offices of a non-profit organization in his community. He spoke positively about the experience. He said his plans were to attend in a technical college to study landscaping. He also planned to remain in his home town. He said he wanted to be part of making it a better place because he has a son who will grow up there. John spoke of his GED class as a family and described the fun class members had together in volunteer community service projects.

Rusty. Rusty was 18 and had been in the GED program a little over two years when I interviewed him. He was making plans to enroll in technical college. He helped box cans of food to be distributed at a senior citizens' center and collected items for a food drive. He was enthusiastic about the volunteer community service in which he had participated. He was particularly excited about his picture's having appeared in the local

newspaper with his class as volunteers. He expressed concern about the confidentiality of a taped interview but accepted my assurance that neither he nor his school could be identified from information included in this study.

Findings

I began this study anticipating that I would be able to gather information from GED students who participated in volunteer community service that would provide insight into the four original research questions listed at the beginning of this chapter. As I interviewed the students, I heard a variety of responses to the questions I posed and realized that their responses were becoming overlapping and redundant. Once I analyzed their responses, I found that the data I collected more clearly supported collapsing the original four questions into the following three questions as seen in Table 4:

1. What did students learn by participating in volunteer community service?
2. How do students view learning after participating in volunteer community service?
3. How has volunteering affected their civic engagement?

Participants learned about the needs in their communities and became aware that some people in the community were surprised to see them volunteering. They also gained personal insight from feeling empowered, feeling good about themselves, and discovering their leadership abilities. Their volunteer community service experience altered the students' perspective on learning as well. They developed an understanding of their personal learning style and became more motivated to learn. Finally, participating in volunteer community service affected the civic engagement of the interview participants. As a result of their volunteering, they said they wanted to address and help solve

community problems, encouraged others to participate in volunteer activities, and continued volunteering or planned to do so.

Table 4

Overview of Findings from Student Responses

What did students learn by participating in volunteer community service?

- About their communities
 - Saw community needs
 - Saw that their volunteering surprised others
 - Understood reasons for volunteering
- About themselves
 - Felt empowered
 - Felt good about themselves
 - Discovered leadership qualities

How do students view learning after participating in volunteer community service?

- Became aware of personal learning style
- Became more motivated to learn

How has volunteering affected their civic engagement?

- Wanted to help address and solve community problems
- Encouraged others to participate in community service
- Continued or planned to continue volunteering

Learning from Community Service

According to Fenwick (2000), learning takes place in classrooms, but it also occurs in many nonformal settings. Further, “individuals learn as they interact with the community” (p. 253). The first research question in this study asks what GED students learn by participating in volunteer community service. This question was designed to explore the activity as a learning experience for the GED students whom I interviewed for this study. The findings regarding what these students learned from community service is divided into two categories: what they learned about their communities and what they learned about themselves. Three sections describe what the students learned about their communities. First, they saw community needs of which they had not been aware. Second, they encountered others who were surprised to see them participating in volunteer community service projects. Third, they gained an understanding of reasons for volunteering. The findings regarding what students learned about themselves appear in three subsections. First, students felt empowered as a result of their volunteer activities. Second, volunteering made them feel good about themselves. Third, students discovered that they had leadership qualities.

The GED instructors who incorporated volunteer community service into their program said that they did so to broaden their students’ horizons. They took their students outside of the classroom for opportunities to enhance their education. The instructors did not require their students to participate in community service projects. However, by encouraging participation, they said that they were able to get most of their students involved.

About Their Communities

Saw unmet needs. One of the new understandings these student volunteers gained in the course of their community service experience was that their communities had unmet needs. Because most of the interview participants had never volunteered prior to their experience with their GED classmates, it probably is not a surprise that most knew little about their communities. Several of the interview participants said that, in the course of participating in volunteer service projects, they saw needs in their communities of which they were previously unaware. These needs spanned a wide range – from more volunteers in public school classrooms, to help in distributing food boxes to senior citizens, to disaster relief in the wake of a tornado.

Nicole, a 39-year-old mother who had been a GED student for about a year, went with her class to read to children in the pre-K classes at their county's elementary school. In the course of this experience, she learned that there is a shortage of public school teachers in her community. "There's a desperate need for teachers. My daughter is a special-needs child. I volunteer in her class as much as I can. I had an idea about some of the [need for additional teachers], but I didn't know how much," she said. Her perception of the high quality of the local schools has led her to feel that her community strongly supports the schools there.

Mary, who attended GED classes at the same college where Nicole was a student, was a veteran volunteer. At 62, she had spent many hours helping out in volunteer projects with her church and a local chapter of a civic organization. Nevertheless, she discovered a need while volunteering with her GED classmates that she had not realized before that time. She said she learned that many more people in her community needed

GED classes than she knew. She discovered the need when she joined others in her class in passing out GED program recruitment flyers on a parade route. “We have many who can’t read, and they’re ashamed of it. I said, ‘Don’t be ashamed of it. Come out and join us because we’re seeking for students. We’re asking people to come forward,’” she said.

While Mary had an impressive record as a volunteer before she participated in a community service project with her GED class, others were inexperienced. Mike, an 18-year-old, was a novice at performing community service. He had been a GED student for about eight months. For him, helping with his class in an activity as a community service volunteer was eye-opening. Mike had been away from his hometown for several years before he enrolled in GED classes. Once there, he joined his classmates in performing volunteer community service. When he went with the group to a food bank to help distribute boxes of food to senior citizens, he learned that older people sometimes need help with obtaining food. He saw something at the senior citizens’ center that he had seen many times growing up but until he helped with distributing food boxes he did not quite understand. “My grandmother would come here and I would see her have a box, but I didn’t know where they came from or why she got them. I didn’t even know [what] commodities [were] until when I actually came here and when they needed my help and I actually helped them out,” he said.

Another project in which Mike was involved was painting the office of a non-profit organization in his community on a United Way Day of Caring. He was one of the painters working inside of the building. It was in the course of his involvement with his classmates on this project that he learned that organizations such as this one often need volunteers to help with painting and remodeling jobs when they cannot afford to hire

professionals. Mike also discovered through his experience how people will come together to help each other. He described the insight he gained as follows:

I seen a lot of people put forth effort. People [were] cooking for us. People that actually knew what they were doing with, you know, with remodeling and stuff, especially with the outside, were just fixing up places where the boards were falling off. [Some people] used a spray gun to paint the outside. There were people putting newspaper over the windows so we wouldn't get paint on them.

At the same time, Mike learned about the services offered by the organization whose building he helped to paint. "I didn't know much about it [before the service project] really. I found out that children go there in the afternoon and get help with studying," he said.

Rusty, who was 18 at the time of the interview, was the youngest of the participants. He enrolled in GED classes when he was 16. He said he became aware of a specific need in his community while working with his GED classmates to help tornado victims. When a tornado struck his county several months prior to my interview with him, "there were a lot of people with no warning who was struck," he said. "We have no tornado sirens. There were people who were stuck inside [of a substance abuse treatment facility] when the tornado hit [because they didn't know the tornado was coming]. My role was to help get clothing through my church and anything that could be used to donate to the people who were in that building," he said.

At the time of the interview, 21-year-old Ashton was making plans to enter the Job Corps. She learned about a need for volunteers in child care centers in her community through volunteering in one with her GED classmates. She said knew very little about her

community even though she had lived in it for several years. Community service had never been a priority for her, she said. However, volunteering with her classmates in community service projects opened her eyes to aspects of her community with which she had no previous experience. One of those aspects was child care. When her teacher told the GED class members that they had been invited to visit the local Even Start center to read to the children there, Ashton said, she was expecting a fun day of interacting with the children. She said that, since she had no children, she did not know about the high quality of child care provided at the publicly funded Even Start center or the need for volunteer help there. She said that she was very impressed by the teachers and their relationship with the children, but she said she also realized that they needed volunteer help so they could give each child more attention.

I got to know those ladies out there, and they seemed very nice. It made me think if I'm living here when I have kids that [Even Start] would be a good program for my kids. [Now] I go with my friends to pick up their kids and see how happy their kids are and they always have to hug their teacher and tell them they love them and can't wait to see them the next day. They are just so nice to them and the kids and just act like they love them.

Saw that their volunteering surprised others. While the GED student volunteers were finding out about the needs in their communities, they also learned something about a view some members of their communities held toward them. In some cases, surprise that the students were volunteering accompanied gratitude for the community service they were providing.

Mike, an 18-year-old who was new at volunteering, helped paint the inside of a non-profit organization's office. While working on this project, he discovered that other members of the community did not seem to be accustomed to seeing young adults participating in volunteer community service activities. "They were all very happy, but they were a little bit surprised. Not many young people put forth the effort [to volunteer] when you ask them because some of them nowadays like to do other things," he said.

Mary, the oldest of the interview participants, said that she surprised many of her acquaintances the day she walked along a parade route distributing fliers to recruit people to her GED class. They did not know she was enrolled in GED classes and did not understand why she was out recruiting students. During our interview, she gave the following description of an encounter with an acquaintance she met on the parade route:

I saw this one girl and she asked me, "I didn't know you were in [GED] class."

She said she was going to come, so I say, "You need to come on." She was worried that it was just too much, but I told her it's not too much. I said that if she wanted this GED, she was going to have to fight a fight. I told her every time she put it off, she was getting more behind. I said she needed to come on [to class] and get [a GED diploma].

Understood reasons for volunteering. As GED students engaged as volunteers in community service activities, they obtained an understanding of reasons for volunteering. Upon recognizing that volunteering is by definition service given for free, they found that it offers its own intrinsic rewards. Further, they learned that volunteering has practical value beyond satisfaction for volunteers.

First, interview participants said they received non-material rewards from their volunteer community service. The students said that once they became involved in their respective community service projects, they were comfortable doing work as unpaid volunteers because of the satisfaction they received. “Well honestly, one time I wished I was being paid because I was busy working my butt off, but after I get done, it’s worth it. I was helping out in doing what I thought was right,” said Rusty, the youngest of the interview participants. John, who had come from National Guard Youth Challenge and had been a GED student only five months at the time of the interview, was another who did not feel that being paid was important when he worked as a volunteer. He explained his feelings with the following comments:

You don’t have to get paid to do something that you know is going to help out your community or you know that’s going to make the environment better. I stayed in this county for 22 years, so anything I can do to help that is going to involve the community and is going to be positive, it’s kinda your responsibility.

Allie sought help from her instructor when the rehabilitation facility where she lived was hit by a tornado. She said that she was willing to come back her former class site to be interviewed for this study because she “had to give back what [she] had got.” She said she had no problem with working as a volunteer without receiving compensation. “It’s fine because it makes your heart feel good. You get paid in your soul,” she said.

Second, interview participants felt that volunteering made a practical contribution to their personal growth that will be particularly useful as they seek employment. Volunteering can have long-range effects such as resume building, some of them said.

Allie thought volunteering had improved her social skills because she worked as part of a team. “[People] need those skills in college and for other education,” she said. She also pointed out that she could list volunteer experience on her resume when she applies for a job because potential employers “see that you’re very open to do things for the community. Stuff like that helps,” she said.

While John enjoyed the social aspect of volunteering, he saw a practical side to the activity as well. “You never know what type of people you are going to meet [while volunteering]. You can run into someone and they may give you a job offer at that time,” he said. He added that another possibility is that someone he met while volunteering might remember him and hire him later.

Alexis, who had been a student in GED classes for more than two years, was the least enthusiastic of the interview participants. Yet she credits her part in volunteering at an Even Start center with helping her get a job at another day-care facility even though she later decided that child care would not be her life’s work. She said that she wants a job with higher pay and greater opportunities for advancement than she thinks she can earn working in child care. Still, she believes her volunteering gave her experience that can help her be successful in other fields as well. “Volunteering can make room for other things. I volunteered once and got two good-paying jobs afterwards just because I volunteered,” she said.

About Themselves

At the same time GED students I interviewed for this study were learning about their communities through volunteering, they also were gaining personal insight. First, they felt empowered as individuals to make a difference in the lives of others and in their

communities. Next, they said they felt good about themselves for having helped others through volunteering. Finally, some discovered leadership qualities they did not know they had until they participated in volunteer community service activities.

Felt empowered. One thread ran through the interviews and tied students from three colleges together in a common reaction: They felt that by participating in volunteer community service, they had made a difference in their communities and in the lives of others. However, a particularly compelling finding was that even students who had prior experience volunteering did not appear to have realized that they had this personal power until they articulated it during the interviews. They seemed not to have made the connection previously. After her experience with tornado recovery, Allie explained, “I learned that you can make a difference, just one person can. That meant a lot to me that I could actually help somebody else in my community. It changed me. I became much stronger and hopeful.”

Allie said that she had no idea that she could help others until she needed help herself. She and her two children were living at a substance abuse facility with several other women and children. She was attending GED classes at the same time. About eight months before I interviewed her, a tornado struck and destroyed the facility where she lived. Allie, like the other residents, lost virtually everything she had. She began to realize that she had the personal power to make a difference when she took the first step by asking her GED instructor for help. Her instructor mobilized the class members to take on the women and their needs as a volunteer community service project. Allie found herself on both sides – volunteer and recipient.

I didn't know what else to do so I came to [her GED instructor]. Me and her, we got together. We helped all the girls call FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]. We got donations from the college. We got donations from the telephone company – little things like that just to help us out because we didn't have anything so we came together to help everybody.

As she saw community members responding, Allie said that she continued to speak out. She said she saw what she could do as one person when she contacted a television station in a nearby city. She knew in doing so she was breaking one of the rules of the substance abuse treatment program. Those who owned the facility had forbidden residents to speak with media representatives.

They weren't letting us talk to nobody, no reporters. They didn't want us to speak to anybody. I am going to speak. I am going to be heard. I basically stood up for my friends and gathered some help. My other friends [in the GED class] did, too. It was risky. I mean we risked [being forced to leave the facility], but we were going to help [the women residents] get what they needed. That's what [members of the GED class] did.

Allie was unusual among interview participants in that she had a personal stake in the volunteer community service in which she participated with her class. Most, like John, followed the lead of their GED instructors who asked them to help out. Even so, these other interview participants reported, as Allie did, that they became aware for the first time of their personal power.

John found that he can speak up when necessary. He said volunteering for community service with his GED class taught him that when he has a good idea, people

will listen to him. He had such an experience while working with the other students in a volunteer project. He and his classmates helped paint the office of a non-profit organization in his community during a United Way Day of Caring. Until then, John had not seen himself as a force for change. He described himself as working well as part of a team, but he also learned that he could step forward and have his ideas and opinions heard as well. The revelation came as quite a surprise to him, he said.

I thought, “I’m just 22, so what is my word? What can I say that’s going to make a difference?” Then when you go into these community-service projects and you help [people], and they ask you what you think, and you tell them, and they think it sounds like a good idea, it shocks you because someone actually listened to you. It was a great thing. You know everyone is caring. Everyone listens to what everyone has to say. Then we come up with the best situation to get things done the right way.

Both Allie and John learned from their volunteer community service experience that they could be vocal in their efforts to make a difference. They described speaking up as volunteers and recognizing that they had power as an individual to make a difference.

Rusty, the youngest, also felt empowered by engaging in volunteer community service with his GED class. As he said, “When I help others, the community can get better. It teaches people that there’s always a way to get out [of difficulties] as one person comes out and helps with what needs to be done. It gives hope. This community can be changed.”

Others worked quietly but still realized that they could be a force for good in the lives of others. Mike, for example, had volunteered in a blood drive several times. He had

donated blood and recruited others to donate. He saw the experience as a way of saving lives. He also helped with a painting project and with giving boxes of food to senior citizens at a food bank. While working in these activities as part of a team, Mike said he saw that he was using his personal power to make a difference. He said that he especially enjoyed his part in the group activity when he helped paint at a non-profit center. According to Mike, while he was painting, "I saw a lot of people putting forth effort. People were cooking for us. People who actually knew what they were doing with remodeling were outside fixing up places where boards were falling off."

Felt good about themselves. Internal motivators such as self-esteem may be the most powerful for adult learners (Knowles, 1970). Further, community service gives students an opportunity for action; therefore, it can show them that they are competent (Eyler and Giles, 1999). Without exception, the GED students interviewed for this inquiry reported that their volunteer community service experience made them feel better about themselves and more capable of success.

Estimation of themselves and their personal worth seemed to have increased for GED students interviewed for this study after they performed volunteer community service with their classmates. They said that they began to understand that, by helping others, they were enriching themselves as well. They talked about how they saw themselves as more capable after their volunteer experience. Jimmy, at 54, had been a GED student off and on for 10 years. He described himself as shy. He said that his participation with his class in a volunteer project at a local elementary school made him feel better about himself. His role in a project where GED students read to children at the elementary school was to pass out books to the children. He said that he enjoyed the

experience and wants to be one of the readers the next time. “If I keep on going and working at it, I think I will enjoy reading to the little kids,” he said.

Ashton, on the other hand, raised the issue of her own self-esteem. She said it had been low most of her life. However, she said that her self-esteem had improved as a result of her being part of a group of GED students who, as volunteers, read to children. “My self-esteem is not very high because of the way I was raised. [Volunteering] helped a lot. It makes me realize that I can do something with my life,” she said. Before reading to children at an Even Start child-care center as a community service volunteer, Ashton felt that she could barely help herself reading. She wondered how she could help anyone else. Her feelings changed in the course of the experience. “What I understand, I can help others with. What I don’t understand, they can help me with. I realize that we can help each other with what we know,” she said.

Katie, the mother of a small boy, said that volunteering improved her self confidence. She dropped out of high school because she had fallen behind in her studies and said she did not feel that she could get help from her teachers. She described herself as having felt helpless. Volunteering with her class gave her more confidence. “You put your mind to it, you can do it. I mean, don’t just sit around and wait for something to come up. Get up and do something,” she said.

Participating in volunteer community service by reading to children made Matt more confident that he could reach his goals. He said that the experience strengthened his will to earn his GED diploma.

You are always striving to do better. You learn that you got to move forward at least each step until you meet your goal. It gets rough. Then you say I got to do

this because I got to meet my goal. You get this will and you say, “Okay, I’m going to do this because I want to. I’m going to do it for me.”

Alexis said that her volunteer experience at a public day-care center gave her the confidence to apply for a job at a private day-care center. Nicole said that reading to children in a pre-K class gave her the confidence to stand in front of a group and speak. Mike described himself as feeling happy when he saw smiles on the faces of seniors to whom he and others handed boxes of commodities at the food bank. “As long as there is one more helping hand, it will help people that much more,” he said. However, his comments about his feelings after working in a blood drive were even stronger and more positive. Mike described those feelings as follows:

I feel pretty happy because I’ve saved somebody. It was in the news that every time you give blood, somebody else’s life that has lost a lot of blood, you know you’ve given [life back] to them. You got more blood in you than somebody else that needs it.

Participating in volunteer community service with his GED classmates taught Rusty something about empathy. “It helped me learn to care about other people besides myself,” he said.

Discovered leadership qualities. A third personal insight the GED students gained from their participation in volunteer community service was that they had leadership qualities of which they previously had not been aware. Allie saw her leadership abilities surface when the drug and alcohol abuse rehabilitation facility where she lived was struck by a tornado. She marshaled the other facility residents into a team so they could step out to help themselves. She also led her friends in her GED class in

seeking assistance. “[We] reached out to the community to try to get us some help and assistance with stuff for our kids – bottles, diapers.”

John, too, said he learned that he could be a leader by participating in a volunteer community service project with his GED class. He said that, since at 22 he was the oldest in the group, others “kinda listened” to him about completing work before socializing. “They said, ‘Okay, he is right. Let’s go ahead and finish and then we can go outside and goof off,’” John said. He described himself as acting as a role model for younger GED students when he encouraged them to stay on task and finish their assignments in the community service project before relaxing.

While recruiting her friends to enroll in GED classes, Mary, the 62-year-old, learned that they were impressed that she was a GED student. Most of her friends had not been aware that she was attending classes. She realized from their comments that they saw her as a leader in encouraging them to continue their education. She related their comments and her feelings as follows:

After people stated they didn’t know that I was in there, I said, “Yeah, I have been in that program for quite some time now.” They said, “You’re just amazing to me.” I told them I was only trying to help [others]. It made me feel good because I think it was something about me they see that maybe will help them take hold of it and [continue their education].

Mary said she considered herself a role model not only for adults whom she recruited to GED class but for the students who rode the school bus she drove. “I learned how the GED test is run and what it would require to get a GED. Now I can tell others

and kids that it's not easy. I try to encourage the kids I haul everyday to stay in school,' she said.

Alexis, like Mary, said she had influenced others to enroll in the GED classes she attends. She has talked about class to her friends. She recounted the following incident.

There was this one girl who made a thing about her age. She thought she was too old, but she wanted to come [to GED classes] because she heard about me [being a GED student]. I told her she should come and if [she tries] hard enough [she] will succeed. I said, "If you really want a GED [diploma], you could try some classes. It's worth a try."

View of Learning

Kolb (1984) suggested that a mix of academic instruction and practical experience can bring about not only learning but also personal development in adult learners. The second significant point that emerged from the interviews with GED students who had participated in volunteer community service as part of their GED preparation classes is how these students view learning. This section addresses findings in two areas. First, the students became aware of their personal learning styles. Second, they became more motivated to learn.

Became Aware of Personal Learning Style

One of the findings of this study was that projects involving physical work seemed to enhance the learning of GED students. Comments from several of the interview participants support that view. They indicated that they learn best in hands-on opportunities. Interview participants said that their volunteer community service provided just such hands-on experiences. According to Mary, "If you experience something, it's

best. That way what you learn stays with you better than just somebody telling you.”

Mike said that helping paint an office building gave him a new way of learning. “Outside of the classroom, you learn things hands on. It teaches you in a different way.”

Rusty said that learning math was a challenge for him. He said that the tasks he performed during volunteer service helped him better understand the math he was studying in class. “We have to go out and count canned goods to see how much we have. It helps me with my multiplication. [My teacher] taught me to count the number of cans across the top and count how many cans are on the side and multiply. That’s how many cans you have all in the box. That has helped me a lot,” Rusty said.

John said that the practical experience he had during his volunteer community service helped him with math concepts. He said he learned more about measuring “with gallons and half gallons and knowing what size or like how much [paint] you need.” He picked up some additional, technical information as well that he thought might become valuable later. “We had a good time painting and learning the different types of paint – if this is for coating and just getting [the surface] ready for the paint to go on,” he said.

Nicole felt that her experience reading to the children as part of her class project improved her reading skills. She said she believed the experience would help her on the reading section of the GED exam. Katie also said that reading aloud to children during volunteer community service at an Even Start center helped improve her reading ability. “Any time you read to kids, it makes you read better. Reading is important. If you can read, you can do anything,” she said.

Mary expressed strong feelings about the impact of her volunteer experience on her academic progress. In addition to teaching her to cooperate and work with other

people, it helped her toward one of her primary goals in enrolling in GED classes – to learn to learn to speak more clearly. She said that she learns best through experience and that recruiting students for the GED program gave her the opportunity for hands-on experience in working on her speaking skills. As she described it,

Others say, “I don’t know why you are going back to school.” I tell them to enhance my learning. You learn how to really communicate with people. It [helped] me pronouncing words and breaking words down to spell them. [The GED class volunteer community service] really has enlightened me because what I said before was mostly black words, and I have told others [about her success in improving her communication skills].

Became More Motivated to Learn

The second finding embedded in the question of how GED students view learning after participating in volunteer community service activities is that they became more motivated to learn. They reported that they began to focus on their goals and, therefore, attended school more regularly and worked harder on the subjects they studied in class. As a result, they mastered their academic material more quickly, they said.

Nicole, for example, said that she knew what she was learning in class was very important for advancement. However, until her volunteer experience, she did not know what she wanted to do. After participating with her class reading to children in a pre-K class, she knew she wanted to work with children. “It has made me put my mind more towards working and concentrating [in class] and trying to grasp all I can,” she said.

Matt attributed his improved success in the classroom to having volunteered with his classmates. He said reading to children as a volunteer in a pre-K class made his goal

of obtaining a GED diploma more realistic to him because it improved his reading ability. He described his attempts to learn academic material before his participation in volunteer community service as “bogging,” which he defined as “difficult.” Afterwards, however, he said, “My feelings changed a whole lot. I figured I look at it like this: If the little kids their age can learn in so many ways, why can’t I?”

His community service experience led him to read aloud at home to his younger twin brother and sister. Having seen his reading continue to improve, he said he had begun to attend GED class more consistently and was motivated to work harder on all of his academic skills.

Allie credits her experiences in volunteer community service with quicker progress toward her GED diploma. “It made me excited to come to school because it made me look forward to my future. I knew I couldn’t just sit around. I stayed in school longer. I studied more. I wanted [a GED diploma] more. I strived harder, and I graduated,” she said.

Civic Engagement

Eyler and Giles (1999) proposed that service-learning potentially can foster civic values. Community service may have the same effect. Students I interviewed for this study who participated in volunteer community service projects as part of their GED studies reported learning about community problems and wanting to help address them as volunteers. They also said that they encourage others to volunteer for community service and that they were continuing or planned to continue volunteering themselves.

Wanted to Help Address and Solve Community Problems

Interview participants said they wanted to help address and solve community problems to make their communities better places to live. For example, John said that he had lived in his community for 22 years and planned to stay there. After his volunteer experience, he felt that he could approach community leaders and ask them to address a community problem – poor street construction or water problems, for example. Further, he said he felt that attempting to get community problems solved was part of being a community citizen. “Anything that I can do to help that is going to be positive [for] the community is kinda, you know, your responsibility.”

After his visit to an elementary school with his GED classmates, Jimmy became interested addressing needs of his county’s school system by being in being a spokesperson for children. He said he would like to speak to people in positions of authority who could meet educational needs. “[Children] need somebody [to advocate for them] because they can’t speak for themselves. I would like to speak to parents or whoever is in charge,” he said.

Alexis said that, in her community, people with mental health issues need advocates. She would like to work with older people at a mental health center. She said she believed she could be a spokesperson for those who have mental health needs. “I live in a community with a lot of older people, and a lot of them go to [the county health department for mental health services]. I can go out and speak to people and be a spokesman and talk to people about people who don’t have it so good,” she said.

Volunteer community service, especially helping tornado victims, gave Allie direction in life that she said she had not had prior to that experience. She earned a GED

diploma to prepare herself. She said that the community problem she would like to help address and solve is drug abuse. She said wants to work with women who are in drug rehabilitation programs. “When you’re in the addiction of drug abuse, it is almost like you are in a tornado. I would like to help women get back on their feet,” she said.

Rusty helped collect clothing and other necessities for the same people Allie helped after a tornado struck his community several months before I interviewed him. That experience made him aware that his community had no tornado warning system. He said he had set for himself the goal of convincing local officials of the need for a warning system. “I will go to the highest person in office for this community and see what can be done,” he said.

Encouraged Others to Participate in Community Service

The interview participants felt so strongly about the importance of community service that they said they recommend volunteering to others. Mike, for example, said he encourages other young people to become involved in community service. One way he said he does so is by trying to convince them to give blood during blood drives. “A lot of kids don’t want to. You can give off a whole lot just by donating blood and you don’t even know it. I would tell them to try it. I mean give something,” he said.

Mary said she encourages others to volunteer by pointing out that they might need help from a volunteer someday. “In real life you don’t know but what you might be in this same certain place sometime. You may have a relative in a predicament, and you’ll want somebody to do something for him,” she said. She also said she points out that a volunteer does not have to give much time. “You can spare a little bit of time. You don’t have to give it all,” she said.

Continued or Planned to Continue Volunteering

Overall, the GED students I interviewed spoke of volunteering with their classmates in positive terms. They indicated that they felt that the service they performed was worthwhile and that they enjoyed it. In addition to recommending volunteer service to others, they said that they are willing to continue to volunteer. Some already were helping their community neighbors beyond the volunteer service with their class. Others said that they plan to in the future. After passing the GED exam, Mike was one who was involved in volunteering when I met him. He had returned to the class he attended to tutor other GED students. He was in the classroom helping another student with reading on the day of the interview.

Katie had her volunteer experience with her class reading to children at an Even Start center where her little boy is enrolled. She described the project as worthwhile. Because she saw how well the teachers and children received the GED students, she has returned to the center to volunteer on her own time. “When you go out and do stuff like that, you see what your community is all about,” she said. “[Even Start teachers] don’t really have the money to get people to go out there and do anything. They wait for somebody to volunteer and do something.”

Ashton said that she had always wanted to volunteer but was afraid of being judged. “I just kind of stayed on the sidelines and watched other people and didn’t get involved,” she said. Her volunteer community service reading to children at the Even Start center, as Katie did, made her look forward to future volunteer projects her teacher had planned. Ashton said that she would enter the Job Corps once she earns her GED diploma and that she expected to have many opportunities for volunteering then.

Jimmy said that by volunteering in community service projects, he could encourage meet former students who have dropped out of GED classes and encourage them to enroll again. The way he will do this, he said, is “by going around to different communities and being friendly and participating and learning from each community.” He felt that the people he would meet by volunteering would be friendly to him in return. “By going out [into the community], maybe [with encouragement] they will come back to GED [classes].”

Matt may have been the one in the group who had the most life-changing experience as a result of having volunteered. He reported that he has become active with other members of his church in building access ramps at the homes of physically impaired people and working in the yards of elderly people. “They can’t mow their grass and can’t do the things outside that needs to be done. [Church members] go as a group and do it,” he said.

Matt said he was especially interested in building wheelchair ramps for disabled hunters. He said he watches hunting shows on television and would like to help these hunters find ways to continue to enjoy the outdoors. “I watch a lot of hunting shows. That’s my favorite thing to do in my free time. I think if we build them a ramp in their homes, they can go down [the ramp] and enjoy themselves outdoors. Outdoorsmen need that,” he said.

Summary

The findings in chapter 4 are the results of interviews with 11 GED students who attended classes at three two-year colleges in rural Georgia. These students participated

in volunteer community service activities with their classmates as part of their GED preparation experience. The interview questions were as follows:

1. What did students learn by participating in volunteer community service?
2. How do students view learning after participating in volunteer community service?
3. How has volunteering affected their civic engagement?

Originally, the interview questions were as follows:

1. What do GED students learn by participating in volunteer community service?
2. How do GED students view themselves as learners after participating in volunteer community service?
3. How does participation in volunteer community service affect GED students' self-efficacy?
4. How does participation in volunteer community service affect GED students' civic engagement?

Originally, the interview questions were as follows:

1. What did GED students learn by participating in volunteer community service?
2. How do GED students view themselves as learners after participating in volunteer community service?
3. How does participation in volunteer community service affect GED students' self-efficacy?
4. How does participation in volunteer community service affect GEDs tuudents' civic engagement?

Responses from interview participants were overlapping and redundant. Analysis through the constant comparative method and coding of transcripts of recorded interviews showed that data more clearly supports three questions instead of four.

Several primary findings emerged. First, interview participants learned about their communities and themselves. They found that their communities have unmet needs and that some community members were surprised to see them volunteering. In learning about themselves, they felt empowered as individuals to make changes in their communities, felt good about themselves for having volunteered, and discovered that they had leadership abilities. Second, the students altered their view of learning as a result of their volunteering. They became aware of their personal learning styles and became more motivated to learn. Third, volunteering affected their civic engagement. They wanted to address and help solve community problems; they encouraged others to volunteer; and they continued or planned to continue volunteering.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the influence of participation in volunteer community service on GED preparation students. The 11 interview participants were GED students in programs housed in three two-year colleges in rural Georgia. The interview questions sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What did students learn by participating in volunteer community service?
2. How do they view learning after participating in volunteer community service?
3. How has volunteering affected their civic engagement?

Conclusions drawn from analysis of the data and a discussion of the implications of the findings regarding GED preparation instruction appear in this chapter. It also includes recommendations and suggestions for continuing research that would further illuminate this subject.

Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of this study lead to three important conclusions: (a) GED instructors can use volunteer community service with their students as an instructional tool; (b) GED teachers who involve their students in volunteer community service should engage them in formal reflection for maximum learning; (c) including volunteer community service in GED preparation instruction would have implications for state and federal policies. The body of literature on this subject is immature because it appears that little if any research has probed into the value of volunteer community service in the education of GED

preparation students prior to this study. Available literature on the connection between service and learning focuses on the K-12 school system, two-year and four-year colleges, and universities. Even more narrowly, it explores a specific kind of volunteering – service-learning, which also is a type of community service. The basic premise of this literature is that service-learning has three specific outcomes. It improves students' academic performance, improves their self-efficacy, and increases their civic engagement (Eyler & Giles, 1999). A service-learning project could expand a year or more. GED instructors, on the other hand, must use teaching tools that will enhance the learning of students who may be in their classes only a short time. Volunteer community service may offer such a tool.

Using Volunteer Community Service in GED Instruction

The first conclusion drawn from this study is that volunteer community service is a tool for GED preparation instruction that GED teachers can use to enhance student learning. Unlike service-learning projects, volunteer community service projects can be completed within days. Further, volunteer community service falls into the category Kolb (1984) described in his Experiential Learning Theory which guided this study. Kolb called experiential learning the method of choice in learning and personal development for non-traditional students. GED preparation students, who are older adults and teenagers past the age of compulsory attendance in the K-12 school system, fall into this non-traditional category.

Merriam and Brockett (1997) describe experiential education as learning that takes place outside of the classroom. Askov (2000) called it the construction of knowledge and skills through interaction with others and the environment. Fenwick

(2000) described experiential education as having an emancipatory effect on learners. According to Fenwick, individuals learn by interacting with the community and using the tools available to them at the moment. Merriam and Cafferella (1999) pointed out that significant aspects of the learning process are students' experiences, the situations in which they are involved, and the tools they use to navigate those situations. Musil (2003) suggested that when students step outside of the traditional classroom and experience student-centered pedagogies, they develop socially and cognitively. As Fenwick (2000) posited, students may find that their beliefs are upheld or contradicted when they gain knowledge from their involvement with their communities.

Mündel and Schugurensky (2008) said that significant learning takes place when students participate in volunteer work to improve their communities. Fenwick (2000) explains this phenomenon by saying that people construct knowledge as they interact and participate in the community. The new knowledge they acquire from the experience may confirm or contradict their beliefs. As a result, the learner/volunteer, the experience of volunteering, and the community itself are bound together. Eyler and Giles (1999) found that volunteer work may result in students' changing their view of society. They suggested that educators should encourage student involvement in volunteerism.

Putnam (2000) offered the theory that people are becoming continuously more indifferent to each other and to society in general. A year earlier, Eyler and Giles (1999) addressed this same issue by proposing that this lack of connectedness has caused knowledge to be compartmentalized by discipline. As GED students volunteer in service activities, they can connect with their communities and thus integrate what they learn.

Instructors can tailor community service projects to a length of time that will work within the structure of a GED preparation class. Day classes allow students more time in class than evening classes and may be the better choice for engaging students in volunteer service as part of their learning experience. However, opportunities may exist for evening students to participate in volunteer service projects as well. For example, they might read to children in an evening child-care program.

Incorporating Reflection into Volunteer Community Service

The second conclusion drawn from this research is that GED instructors should create time for their students to reflect on their community service after the service activity as part of their learning experience. Eyler (2002) pointed out that students must be able to evaluate conflicting information and make decisions in order to address social issues. Seider (2006) suggested that educators can support their students in this regard by expanding their view of society through a commitment to volunteering. According to Eyler and Giles (1999), students generally do not see a connection between their classroom learning and public issues. They propose as a remedy volunteer service that can impact a student's understanding of social issues and the need for change. They also posit that it is reflection that ties the student service experience to academic learning.

Adding a reflection component to students' volunteer community service experiences would enhance the students' recognition of the multi-dimensional nature of what they learn from their community service activity. Reflection would give students an opportunity for discussion that would help them explore and articulate their thoughts. Formal reflection is a crucial component in service-learning but was missing from volunteer community service experience of the GED students interviewed for this study.

They appeared not to have considered some of the outcomes of their volunteer activities until they reflected on their activities as they answered the interview questions.

Kolb (1984) denoted reflection as one of the four stages of the cycle of learning – experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Learners engaged in service activities construct knowledge and skills in two ways: by interacting with others and the environment and by reflecting on the experience (Askov, 2000). According to Eylar and Giles (1999), it is reflection that ties the student service experience to academic learning. Volunteer community service is much less structured than service-learning, and GED students rarely remain enrolled in a program as long as K-12 or college and university students do. Service-learning can be a single project that spans one or more academic years. Volunteer community service, on the other hand, can be one activity completed in one or two days. Even with the short activity, though, GED instructors can lay the groundwork with their students before their service activity and engage them in reflection afterward. According to Fenwick (2000), students construct knowledge through hands-on learning and reflecting on their experience. GED instructors can enhance their students' service experience by facilitating reflection on the experience. By reflecting, students would examine their volunteer experiences and extract learning from them. It would help them understand the value of the service they performed as volunteers.

Reflection should occur in the classroom and begin soon after the volunteer community service experience. This reflection could be individual or collaborative. Several class activities such as group discussion, journaling, and specific writing assignments lend themselves to reflection. Written reflection would be especially useful with students who continue in the GED programs for several more months after their

volunteer service. After some time had passed, instructors would need to help their students revisit their earlier reflections with the advantage of additional separation of time from the service activity. By examining both the volunteer activity and their first reflections on it, the students would learn more about themselves and the value of the service they performed. Further, their written reflection would help prepare students to write thoughtful essays on the GED exam. Finally, understanding that participation in volunteer community service has positive effects on GED students should prompt teachers to incorporate reflection on the service activity as a vehicle for increasing their students' interest and engagement in learning.

Influencing Federal and State Policy

The third conclusion drawn from the findings of this study is that including volunteer community service in GED preparation instruction can influence policy on the federal and state levels. Four primary, or core, benchmarks measure the progress of GED students under federal funding guidelines. These are (1) to obtain employment, (2) to retain employment, (3) to enter post-secondary education, and/or (4) to obtain a GED credential. State adult education offices annually negotiate the percentages of goal attainment each state must meet. GED students set goals at enrollment that become part of their education plans. Teachers review the goals with students periodically. While guidelines emphasize these goals for academic progress and employment, GED instructors also are responsible for helping students set additional goals for holistic personal development.

The secondary benchmarks include such personal life changes as students' becoming more involved in their children's schools, registering to vote for the first time,

and reading to children more regularly. According to Bingman, Ebert, and Bell (2000), adult education programs should be accountable for their performance [in terms of core goals], “but their understanding of performance needs to be broad enough to take into account the varied needs and wants of adult learners in the varied contexts of their communities” (p. 15). Bingman and Ebert (2000) determined that students in GED classes progress at different rates; therefore, their success should not be measured solely with objective tests. According to Merrifield (1998), “When literacy is defined as social practices... intertwined with social relationships... then what is important is what students do with what they learn. Standardized tests ... do not measure what students can do with their knowledge, only whether they can perform well on the test” (p. 35). Participation in volunteer community service may provide instructors with an additional tool for measuring the progress and success of their students. Responses from interview participants indicate that volunteer community service appears to contribute towards their meeting secondary benchmarks that address personal and social goals. It can be concluded, then, that adding volunteer community service would call for more subjective assessment to accompany standardized testing of student progress. Federal guidelines would have to expand to include subjective evaluation for state adult education offices to use this additional type of evaluation.

This section outlined the conclusions drawn from an analysis of the data collected through interviews with GED students and discussed their connections with existing literature. The next section will present implications for the practice of GED instruction and suggestions for further research on volunteer community service in GED instruction.

Recommendations

This section includes recommendations for inclusion of volunteer community service in the GED preparation curriculum. It also discusses implications for the practice of GED instruction and suggests avenues for future research.

Implications for Practice

Teachers can use the successful outcomes of community service participation to help their students meet secondary benchmarks of funding guidelines. To achieve this goal, teachers need professional staff development training opportunities to prepare them to incorporate volunteer community service into their GED instruction. Federal and state funding guidelines as well as the local employing colleges require that instructors participate in annual staff development. Staff development that specifically addresses incorporating volunteer community service into GED preparation instruction could be included in the list of state-sponsored annual staff development opportunities for GED instructors.

Little if any research has addressed the value of volunteer community service in the education of GED preparation students. Instead, existing research has focused on service-learning which is a distinct form of volunteering. However, it has community service as one of its tenets. Service-learning generally is employed as a teaching tool in K-12 school systems, colleges, and universities. Comings and Soricone (2007) pointed out that adult literacy, of which GED preparation is an aspect, sometimes draws on instructional theory from the K-12 system. The purpose of service-learning is to benefit both the provider and the recipient (Furco, 1996). Community service, on the other hand, has as its primary purpose benefit to the recipient. Data collected for this study indicate

that volunteer community service also can benefit the provider in ways similar to those of service-learning. Ultimately, service-learning and volunteer community service have the same social goals. Both activities result in community benefit. Therefore, service-learning as a teaching methodology provides a valid framework in which to discuss the implications of volunteer community service as part of GED instruction.

A significant implication for the practice of GED instruction is that teachers may find a greater academic success rate with students who reach these benchmarks after they participate in volunteer community service. Astin, Sax, and Avalos (1999) found that volunteer community service activities left students more empowered and more committed to education. Collaterally, instructors may find teaching these motivated students to be more exciting. When instructors incorporate volunteer community service into their GED programs, local employers can benefit by having a larger pool of potential employees from which to hire because students have received hands-on education through involvement with their communities. Volunteer community service experiences can offer an avenue for holistic development of people and also prepare them to become productive employees who will be able to leave public assistance. Their education would include a critical-thinking component described by St. Clair (2002) as a significant outcome of experiential education. This holistic development should add to the employability of GED students in the workplace. In doing so, it gives students the tools with which to fulfill the requirements of one of the Equipped for the Future (EFF) role maps – the Worker Role Map (Stein, 2000). This role map calls for adults to be able to plan and direct their personal and professional growth. These potential employees likely will be characterized by strong self-esteem and engagement in community matters.

Communities will benefit by having more citizens who understand and accept their civic responsibility. The interview participants' perception of their increased civic engagement aligns with the conclusion that service-learning in civic education teaches the connection between rights and responsibilities necessary in democratic communities (Hepburn, 1997). This increased civic engagement addresses another of the Equipped for the Future role maps – Citizen/Community Member Role Map (Stein, 2000). In this role, citizens are called upon to become and stay informed, form and express opinions and ideas, work together, and take action to strengthen communities. Engaging GED students in volunteer community service also may be an antidote to the position of Mezirow (1996) who maintained that adult literacy has been sanitized of responsibility for helping students understand how to take responsible social action as citizens in a democracy.

The results of this study expand the existing literature on the value of community service as a facet of education by adding the dimension of its impact on GED preparation students. The implications for practice are that these results can inform the practice of GED instruction by suggesting the community as an alternate classroom and can advance the knowledge of best practices by offering interaction with the community through volunteer service as an additional tool for instruction.

This section presented implications of the research findings for GED instructional practices. The next section will offer suggestions for additional research.

Suggestions for Additional Research

Because little if any research addressed the influence of volunteering in GED preparation students prior to this study, opportunities abound for additional research. This section will suggest future research topics on this subject. First, no model for

incorporating volunteer community service into GED preparation instruction exists. A detailed comparison of volunteer community service and service-learning could provide guidance to GED instructors interested in incorporating volunteer community service into their teaching methodology. Research can lead to the development of such a model.

Second, further study should take the form of quantitative as well as qualitative research.

Third, the development of a process by which to measure student success more subjectively would increase instructor willingness to engage GED students in volunteer community service.

No model currently is in place for GED instruction with a volunteer community service component. The first recommendation for further study is research that would result in the development of such a model. Among the issues research would need to investigate is the practicality of incorporating volunteer service activities into GED instruction. Participation in community service may be more practical for instructors and students in classes that meet during the day. The reason is that day students attend classes more hours during the week than evening students. The additional class time gives instructors more flexibility with instructional methods than instructors have who meet students for two or three hours twice a week in the evenings. Further research could produce a model that instructors could use to add community service to day or evening classes.

The model should address liability to the adult education program incurred by sending students away from the class site to perform volunteer community service as part of their instruction. Research should unearth precautions necessary in the development of a model to protect the program from liability. Cost of including community service in

GED preparation is a third issue for research. The absence of a model indicates that there is no foundation upon which to anticipate budget implications of adding a community service component to GED preparation. Research should investigate, for example, the possibility of a need for teaching supplies and material relevant to volunteer service and budgetary issues regarding the transportation for students to a community service site. These are primary issues for consideration and resolution in the process of the development of a model for volunteer community service as a component of GED preparation instruction.

Second, conclusions arrived at in this study were reached through the qualitative research method of interviews with students. These conclusions provide insight into students' thoughts and feelings. An alternate study could focus on GED faculty and also use interviews for collecting data. Other options for qualitative research are case studies of students, instructors, or an entire GED class. These suggest eliciting feedback from students particularly on their concept of the value of their volunteer community service. However, quantitative methods offer opportunities for further research as well. One possible quantitative study would involve instructors instead of students and would analyze the data collected from surveys distributed to and completed by GED preparation instructors.

Finally, researchers (Bingman & Ebert, 2000; Bingman, Ebert & Bell, 2000; Merrifield, 1998; Mezirow, 1991; Ozanne, Adkins, & Sandlin, 2005) encourage the inclusion of social goals in adult education and achievement of those goals one indicator of student success. GED instructors are under pressure to produce student achievement that is measured with standardized tests alone. These tests show only academic progress

rather than the full range of students' successes. Instructors need a tool to accompany standardized tests that will allow them to measure student progress more subjectively and in other areas of development beyond academic. Such a tool would help instructors justify the inclusion of volunteer community service in GED preparation instruction and increase accountability.

Summary

Chapter five outlined conclusions, discussions, implications for practice, and suggestions for further research derived from the study of the influence of participation in volunteer community service by GED preparation students. The study expands the existing literature on the link between service and education by adding the dimension of GED instruction to research on K-12, college, and university students.

Interviews with GED students explored three questions:

1. What did students learn by participating in volunteer community service?
2. How do they view learning after participating in volunteer community service?
3. How has volunteering affected their community service?

The findings from an analysis of the data gathered through student interviews led to the following three conclusions that can impact GED instruction: (1) GED instructors can use volunteer community service with their students as an instructional tool; (2) GED teachers who involve their students in volunteer community service should engage them in formal reflection for maximum learning; (3) including volunteer community service in the education of GED preparation student would have state and federal policies.

Implications for practice suggest that teachers need professional development training to be effective in using volunteer community service with their students.

Volunteer community service as a tool for GED instruction can lead to holistic development of students and help meet the requirements of Equipped for the Future role maps.

Suggestions for additional research include developing a model for volunteer community service as a component of GED instruction, using quantitative and qualitative methods for arriving at conclusions regarding this subject, and developing a subjective method of measuring student success from participation in volunteer community service.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background questions

- a) Tell me about your experience as a student in the GED program beginning with when you first enrolled.
 - b) Tell me about the time when you were involved as a volunteer in a project to help people in your community.
 - c) Could you describe the things you did as part of this project?
 - d) How did you come to be involved in this particular project?
 - e) Who encouraged you to become involved in this project and how?
 - f) As you look back on the project, do other events stand out in your mind? Could you describe them for me?
1. What do GED students learn from participating in volunteer community service?
 - a) Would you tell me about some of the things you learned about your community by being involved in this project?
 - b) What did you like best? Least?
 - c) What new information did you get from the project that you did not know before?
 - d) Before you took part in the project, what were your feelings about what you were learning in class?
 - e) What were your feelings afterward?
 - f) What advice would you give a GED student who has the opportunity to work on a community service project?
 2. How do GED students view themselves as learners after participating in volunteer service projects?
 - a) Was everybody involved in the project doing the same activities at the same time?
 - b) How did this project change what you thought about the way you learn?
 3. How does GED students' participation in volunteer community service affect their self-efficacy?
 - a) What did you anticipate the volunteer project would be like? How were you changed, if at all, by this experience?
 - b) Why?
 - c) What are your feelings about your personal power as a result of this experience?
 4. How does participation in volunteer community-services projects affect GED students' civic engagement?

- a) What community activities are you engaged in now?
- b) How, if at all, have your thoughts and feelings about yourself as a member of your community changed since you volunteered in this project in your GED class?
- c) If you were to recommend this experience to someone else, what would you tell that person about it?
- d) Is there anything you would like to add that I didn't ask you?

APPENDIX B
 CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEW

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study titled “THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEER COMMUNITY SERVICE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF GED PREPARATION STUDENTS” conducted by Dahlia Allen from the department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy at the University of Georgia (478 247-7849) under the direction of Dr. Desna Wallin, Department of Lifelong, Education, Policy, and Administration at the University of Georgia (706 583-8098). I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can refuse to participate or stop taking part without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The reason for this study is to research GED preparation students’ involvement in volunteer community service to find out how such participation affects their development. There are at least three groups who should benefit from the results of the study – GED students, GED instructors, and future employers of GED students. The results may indicate whether participation in such activity has a positive effect on the education of GED students. If so, this finding could expand GED instruction to give students the opportunity to acquire skills – the ability to think critically, for example – that they could combine with those they acquire in the formal classroom setting. Instructors would have a vehicle for expanding their instructional practices in ways that may pique students’ interest in areas that may encourage greater engagement in learning. Employers then would have the opportunity to hire workers with a holistic education that included not only academic but also real-world experiences.

If I volunteer to take part in this study I will be asked to do the following things:

- 1) Meet with the investigator for an interview that will last approximately one hour.
- 2) Answer questions about the community service project in which I participated.
- 3) Allow the investigator to tape-record the interview.
- 4) Be willing to talk with the investigator at some time after the interview to clarify my information.
- 5) If asked, read a transcript of my interview to ensure that my answers have been transcribed correctly.

I understand that:

1. There is no anticipated risk or discomfort to me from participation in this research project.
2. I will not be identified in the final product of the research.
3. My answers will not be associated with me in any identifiable way.
4. My college will not be identified in the final product of the research.
5. I will receive no compensation for participating in the interview.
6. The investigator will answer any further questions I have about the research before or during the course of the project.

7. I am giving the researcher permission to use the answers I provide in compiling information from all interviews conducted in the course of this research.

I also understand that I am free to contact the researcher for any pertinent information about the research by phone at (478) 274-7849 or by email at dallen@heartofgatech.edu.

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive signed copy of this consent form for my records.

Name of Researcher: Dahlia Allen Signature: _____

Date _____

Telephone: (478) 274-7849

Email: dallen@heartofgatech.edu

Name of Participant: _____ Signature: _____ Date:

Please sign both copies, keep one, and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Research Center, Athens Georgia, 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-mail Address IRB@uga.edu