Perspectives of a Summer Enrichment Academy: Participant and Observer Reflections

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Abstract
Students and teachers rarely come together, at least in a meaningful way, outside the confines of the school environment. Seeing your students at Wal-Mart does not constitute "meaningful interaction". This fact alone makes the GEAR UP Summer Enrichment Academy (SEA), held at California State University, San Bernardino in the summer of 2006, an epic event. The SEA brought students and teachers from the Rialto and Coachella school districts together with faculty from CSUSB for an intensive, enriching learning experience. Selected bright, young students were given opportunities to explore disciplines far outside of the range of their normal classroom experiences and a chance to immerse themselves in college life. College professors and community experts were given the chance to touch young minds and sharpen their teaching skills with students who were younger and very different from their usual charges. Middle school teachers were given a chance to focus on students instead of teaching and managing, as well as a chance to learn many new things themselves. What follows are my observations about the Summer Enrichment Academy.

Keywords
- teaching
- social studies

Author Statement
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Participant and Observer Reflections  
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Students and teachers rarely come together, at least in a meaningful way, outside the confines of the school environment. Seeing your students at Wal-Mart does not constitute “meaningful interaction”. This fact alone makes the GEAR UP Summer Enrichment Academy (SEA), held at California State University, San Bernardino in the summer of 2006, an epic event. The SEA brought students and teachers from the Rialto and Coachella school districts together with faculty from CSUSB for an intensive, enriching learning experience. Selected bright, young students were given opportunities to explore disciplines far outside of the range of their normal classroom experiences and a chance to immerse themselves in college life. College professors and community experts were given the chance to touch young minds and sharpen their teaching skills with students who were younger and very different from their usual charges. Middle school teachers were given a chance to focus on students instead of teaching and managing, as well as a chance to learn many new things themselves. What follows are my observations about the Summer Enrichment Academy.

Description of My Background, Role, Interests, and Motivations

I am a middle school social studies teacher who specializes in the history of the Middle Ages. This means that I teach seventh grade students. I am currently beginning my seventh year as a classroom teacher. While many people look at me askance when I explain what I do for a living, I truly enjoy teaching middle school and I actually like children at this age. When they don’t think anyone is watching them, they are actually full of wonder at the world and their emerging place in it. As far as learning goes, they are like babies on the verge of learning to walk without all of the mess. Their brains are developing at a rate that is unparalleled outside of the first two years of life. The changes in their brains and their bodies make my job a challenge, but I relish a challenge. It is at this time in their lives that they decide who they are, what they believe, and, most importantly from my point of view, their views and opinions of themselves as learners. I enjoy the privilege of being a part of this miracle.

While in the process of obtaining a GATE certificate that will, hopefully, enhance my ability to challenge my students, I was gifted with an opportunity to participate in the SEA. As it was explained to me, my role in the SEA was “kid expert”. My job, as I understood it, entailed at least four parts. First, I was to act as an intermediary between the students, who were new to and possibly intimidated by the college experience, and the professors, who may have never worked with such young students in the classroom before and may also have been apprehensive about the idea. Second, I was to model “good student behavior” for the students. I was to show them when to take notes, how to ask questions, and what behavior was appropriate for a college campus. Third, I was to be a source of support and guidance for my “flock” of students. I was instructed to provide
opportunities for self-exploration, journaling, and “warm fuzzies”. I was their mother duck. I herded my little flock of eight all over campus, providing them opportunities to see outside the classrooms. Finally, I was to be an actual student during this, the first year, of the SEA. I was to make observations and dip my toes into the world of research. My interests in the SEA were multifaceted. To begin, I was intrigued by the idea of taking 12 and 13 year olds to a college campus. I wondered what their reactions would be and how they would conduct themselves. I wondered how much they would learn and what we could do to make this not just another classroom experience. I think taking them to a college at this age is very important. It is my hope that, in the long run, it will eliminate some of the “fear of the unknown” associated with college and be instrumental in pushing these particular students toward college. Second, this was a personal and professional growth opportunity for me. As a teacher, I often get caught up in the day to day operations of my class. I forget that “a teacher’s responsibility is not to teach the content…(but) to teach the students.” (Winebrenner, pg. 1) My participation in the SEA required me to step outside my role of classroom teacher and become a cross between paraprofessional, student, and (as I said before), mother duck. I was excited by (and worried about) the possibility of having a different role with students. I would not be “in charge” of the classroom, the curriculum, or the assignments. I was entering into unknown territory. I will not actually admit to being a risk-taker, either in my personal life or my professional life, but sometimes it is nice to “shake it up”.

Inquiry Objectives
I had so many questions when this idea was first introduced during our class sessions. Aside from the mundane aspects of “Exactly how is this going to work?” and “How are we going to do this?”, the cohort of teacher leaders developed three specific questions about the SEA experience. As a teacher leader and a student, it was my job to seek evidence to help begin to answer our queries. While the questions are in no way completely answered, I believe I have at least started to find some information to help evaluate the program.

How might this seven day college experience affect/impact the development and college trajectory of these students?
I wholeheartedly believe that the students involved will thrive and grow, both as learners and as people, as a direct result of their involvement with SEA. While the opportunity to take college classes at a college at the age of 12 or 13 will have a deep and long lasting impact, I believe that the involvement in the group is just as vital. This year we laid the groundwork for the futures of these students. They now have some “college” under their belts, and I believe they will seek more opportunities and take more risks. Just the idea that learning can take place outside of the walls of their middle school, that people care enough about them to put forth the time and effort to organize such an experience, and the relationships that they have developed and will continue to develop over the next few years are definite points in favor of their success in school and in life. By taking students to college at such a tender age, much of the mystery of a college campus is dispelled. They have been there, worked with actual professors, and experienced classroom success. By not having
“assignments” and “grades”, we allowed the students to learn purely for the sake of the experience. There were no tests or finals, and yet they all put forth amazing effort and completed the projects and assignments that they were given. It was uplifting to see students engaged in learning without having to be bribed, coerced, or bullied into doing it. As this was only the first year of the program, I am speculating on the possible outcomes. However, I can say that I was there, in the classroom, and I saw students learning freely and openly, without reservations or the feeling that they were doing something “unacceptable” to their peers. This was a place where all of the students were either achievers or potential achievers, so there was no reason for them to be anything but the brilliant students they actually are.

**How will my role as a teacher leader and facilitator differ from regular classroom teaching and how might it evolve over the time of the program?**

Words are simply not adequate enough to describe how different being a teacher-leader is from being an actual teacher. It would be paltry for me to say that I was apprehensive at the beginning of the program. I teach Social Studies. I have taught the same thing since I began working in the Rialto district. I have a classroom that I have control of and where I make the decisions. I am really good at what I do. The SEA forced me to step outside of those confines. While this was, in a word, terrifying for me, it was also exhilarating. I did not have a choice, I had already agreed to do it, and so I could not back out. It felt a little bit like the time I went skydiving and had to be physically pushed out of the door of the plane. When those students walked in, I nearly bolted – physically. I was terrified that I would make a fool of myself trying to be some sort of touchy-feely, journalizing ball of fluff. I was afraid of being deemed unimportant or, worse, a nuisance, in the classroom, or that the professors would find a middle school teacher a ridiculous model of a real educator. I was terrified I would loose one of my “ducklings” and be ejected out of the world of academia forever. While I will not go so far as to say that I am now a touchy-feely, journal writing fluffball, I will admit that I grew because of my involvement with the SEA. I enjoyed the time I got to spend with my “ducklings”, even though I could not force myself to assign many journal activities. I learned a lot about the students simply by listening to them. On the way to classes, waiting for the busses, and our daily trip to Starbucks were perfect opportunities for listening to the students and finding out what they were thinking and who they were. The professors that were chosen for the program were easily as adept at putting me at ease and making me feel useful as they were at modifying the curriculum for the students. They asked for my input and opinions and genuinely wanted to hear what I had to say. They were gracious when the students acted like middle school students (which they are) and quick to change the pace or adapt the lesson to keep the kids engaged. I am not sure I really ever want to be a full-time college professor, but I would certainly work with this group again if given the chance. I will also be less apprehensive the next time I am put into a similar situation, because I proved to myself that I can adapt. I may scream and holler while I do it, but different may not be so bad. I was (gently) pushed into this role and I believe I came out the other end a more complete person and a better teacher.
How do the university professors and community experts relate and tailor their instruction for middle school students?

The two university professors I had the privilege of working with during the SEA were absolutely amazing. On the first day of class, Professor Reynolds was nervous, talked too fast, and could not find anything on the first day. This was very refreshing for me. She was almost as nervous as I was, but on the first day she equipped the students with cameras, knowledge and an assignment and set them to work. Dr. J simply looked shell shocked at first, but he quickly found his “groove” and had the students hypothesizing about the effects a rubber mallet would have on a bowling ball. Then he set them up to play a game, which is always a good way to start with students of this age. Both of the professors were able to adjust their instruction to suit the students. If something was not working, they were quick to change it. They designed hands-on, interactive learning experiences that engaged the students. They gave them opportunities to learn without using books and tests. They felt no need to assign a paper or make the students take extensive notes. The students at the SEA made ensured a more homogeneous class experience. There were no students who were ‘behind’ or ‘needed help’ because the material was new to most of us. Because the students were all gifted or advanced learners on some level, both professors were able to incorporate cooperative group learning where none of the students were “expected to become teachers for their peers” (Winebrenner, pg. 171). All of the students benefited from carefully constructed, cooperative learning experiences. Each student was able to give and receive help, and the professors fostered this idea. Professor Reynolds and Dr. J. may not work with middle school students on a daily basis, but they are gifted at it. They demonstrated for the students the passion they hold for their discipline and that it is acceptable to actually enjoy learning.

Affective Component Overview

The affective component of the SEA was problematic for me from the beginning. I did not relish the idea of trying to prod students into emotional growth and personal exploration. The regular classroom experience does not afford the time to directly explore these aspects of a student. I like it just fine that way. While I enjoyed some of the activities, especially the Pandora’s Box (in which students brought a Treasure Chest of artifacts to represent themselves) and the one about the Native American Fable, I will admit that I found some of the others contrived and boring. I understood that we were not required to complete all of the activities, but I was uncertain of what my alternatives were. I tried to direct some journaling activities, which was acceptable. The students responded to my questions and wrote about their day. We had an arts and crafts day where the students turned a bucket of green and blue pompoms into a competition of who could create the craziest bracelet. The times scheduled for the affective circle time were intruded upon due to late busses or walks back from class, but we adjusted. Surprisingly, the most enlightening time for me was when we just talked. The students, for the most part, opened up with amazing ease. I even got to know the students in my “buddy group” very well too. The affective component of the SEA
needs some work, but it may be that the work is needed on my part. I need to find ways that I am comfortable actually relating to students in a small, intimate group. My quest continues…

Observations and Insights
My observations of this program have been liberally sprinkled throughout this paper. However, I would like to take a moment to point out a few of my most profound insights. First of all, I learned that while these students are middle school students, they can conduct themselves in a mature and studious manner. In my group we had moments (students rolling down the hill, for instance) where they acted like the 13 year olds they are, but, for the most part, in the classroom they were remarkable. They asked insightful questions and made observations that would put some adults to shame. While in physics class discussing Newton’s laws, they were able to take the laws of physics and apply them to everyday situations. Questions posed by the Professor such as “what is going to happen when we roll the bowling ball into the dummy head” were not met with only the expected answer. I will admit that the majority of students said “she’s gonna die” and giggled hysterically, but they also really tried to apply the laws of physics to explain why she was going to die. Second, I believe that this was an important opportunity for me to grow. True growth experiences for teachers are few and far between. In our districts we are sent to trainings, shuffled off to conferences, and inserviced until we want to cry. It is not very often we actually get to grow as teachers by doing something different. I suppose opportunities are out there, but I personally don’t have the time to seek them out. I feel as if I learned a lot about myself personally. I learned that I can be flexible and adaptable; I can step outside of my regular classroom comfort zone and learn a new role. I learned things that I can take back to my classroom. When my students are squirrelly I can demonstrate that laws apply to them because the fact that you can’t pick up a chair with your head resting on the wall prove that Newton’s laws apply equally to everyone. I am not sure what this has to do with my regular curriculum, but it was fun, so we will do it. The absolute value of hands on, relevant learning experience was supremely validated by this program. The students all learned valuable lessons and they did not take a test or write a paper. In a perfect world, this would be learning. Finally, I believe that this experience is valuable to the education system as a whole because it demonstrates the possibilities. Students from economically disadvantaged (for the most part) families were invited to a college to participate in an extended learning opportunity and it went well. With a few notable exceptions, the students conducted themselves in an appropriate manner, participated with zeal in an alternative classroom setting, and learned. I don’t believe you could ask more from the pilot year of this program.

Artifacts
Demonstrating knowledge of the laws of physics by protecting a dummy head from a bowling ball

The students were very excited to use the computers (Apples) in the videography class.
Circle time in the “big room”

Reflections, Discussion, and Conclusion
In reflection, I believe that this was an experience that had both concrete and intangible benefits for all involved. Students were given opportunities to stretch their learning and to develop relationships with “kids like them” in a supportive, non-classroom environment. It is my belief that the long term benefits for students may include increased interest in school and learning, more constructive relationships with peers, and an increased interest in pursuing a college education. In a college setting, it is acceptable to actually enjoy learning, an outlook that is not encouraged in a normal middle school setting. The students were given an opportunity to enjoy success. According to Stevenson, “every single student absolutely must have multiple successes at this age…” (Stevenson, pg. 181) These students experienced success. They were able to create products, test hypotheses, function as an individual and as part of a group, and attend and participate in a college course.

College professors and community experts were given an opportunity to share their knowledge with fresh, young minds and to dwell happily in the knowledge that they have enhanced the learning experiences of some pretty remarkable students. Normal, everyday middle school teachers were welcomed into the fold of academia in a non-threatening, supportive manner. As students, we were conducting research in a natural, holistic way that did not seem contrived or superficial. We were simply looking for answers in the world around us. Even the our professor and the coordinator of this very rich experience, Dr. Daniels, pushed her administrative powers, her organizational skills, her patience, and her ability to multi-task to new limits. I am sure if she had to write this paper, her insight into the project from start to finish would be truly enlightening. In conclusion, I believe that the SEA was a success. According to the policy of the National Middle School Association, middle level schools should provide:

- Curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Varied teaching and learning approaches
- Assessment and evaluation that promote learning
- Flexible organizational structures
- Programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
- Comprehensive guidance and support services (Stevenson, pg. 124)

I believe that we touched on all of the above areas in ways that the “normal” middle school experience cannot even begin to attempt. Our curriculum was challenging, with a variety of teaching approaches. Students self-assessed their projects as they worked on them. The organization was entirely different than a regular school, so therefore it was flexible. We were responsible for watching out for their safety. Teacher leaders took their role as the master of guidance and support
seriously. For certain, there were bumps in the road. It was a costly program to run in its first year, we had to adjust and readjust, and sometimes the teacher leaders were more challenging in their own behaviors than their middle students. But if you put all of that into perspective and remember that students actually learned a lot, enjoyed learning it, and are eager to do it again, you will have to declare that “we did good”.

References

1. Stevenson, C. (2002). Teaching Ten To Fourteen Year Olds,