

More than a Sandwich:

Developing an Inclusive Summer Lunch Literacy Program in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania

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This article describes a case study of an inclusive Summer Lunch Program, focused on nutrition, community engagement, and literacy programming. The Summer Food Service Program is a federally-funded, state-administered program designed to meet the needs of children from low-income families who qualify for free and reduced lunches during the school year. The most tangible outcome of the program is the food and the literacy programming provided to students during the summer months. Secondary outcomes include the development of new social skills, preparation for new educational experiences, less “screen time” for children, and learning about the community and the people in it.

The end of the school year means two things for at-risk school children—no more lunches, and no more school librarians to encourage reading. Statistics show that children who qualify for free and reduced lunches suffer from a “summer gap” in nutrition. Similarly, educators have long been concerned with “summer slide,” or the loss of literacy skills that occurs over the summer months (Kim & Quinn, 2013; Quinn,

Lynch, & Kim, 2014). Federally funded Summer Lunch Programs are intended to be a natural summer extension of the better-known free and reduced meals provided by the National School Lunch Program during the academic year. Unfortunately, only 10% (3.8 million) of children who enjoy free and reduced lunches during the school year participate in Summer Food programming; this “summer gap” is troubling because food insecurity rates among children rise during the summer months (Bruce, De La Cruz, Moreno, and Chamberlain 2017; Gunderson 2015). One of the reasons that the “summer gap” persists is that families and students who qualify for free and reduced lunch during the school year may avoid similar summer programs because of the stigma that they perceive both when registering for such programs and when actually participating in the program (Freeman, Macias, Narayan, Ng, and Yang 2012, 7).

Summer Lunch Programs are designed to meet the nutritional needs of at-risk students; however, best practices in developing these programs now suggest that creating engaging activities will ensure greater participation in the program. For example, a recent evaluation of a library-based summer lunch program also noted that the addition of educational enrichment enhanced participation and prevented summer learning loss among children (Bruce, et al., 2017).

Stigma is a major barrier to participation in food service programs such as SNAP (food stamps) and the traditional free and reduced lunches provided during the academic year. School officials and researchers consistently find that as children age and become more aware of the stigma associated with poverty, they self-select out of free or reduced school lunch participation (Bhatia, Jones, and Reicker 2011; Lopez-Neyman, and Warren 2016). The adult parents of the children who participate in summer lunch programs appreciate the more open and welcoming environment they experience when registering for and participating in such programs. In fact, many summer lunch programs (including the one described in this article) are open to all children, thus reducing any need to prove eligibility or go through an arduous enrollment process. This stands in stark contrast to the stigma, prejudice, confusion, and general lack of kindness and respect that these same participants experience when

applying for and receiving other food services (e.g. SNAP, WIC, TANF, etc.) (Bruce et al. 2017).

The program described here builds on the gains described in these articles and provides further evidence that creating engaging activities will increase participation in the program, all within an inclusive context that minimizes stigma. The purpose of this profile is to showcase a university/community collaboration that created an inclusive, literacy based Summer Lunch Program to feed, educate, and entertain local elementary school children. Our educational focus provides a useful strategy for engaging large numbers of children, and it is our hope that it serves as a useful model to practitioners who are interested in replicating our work in other communities. These camp-like activities work to erase the stigma associated with a free Summer Lunch program with an emphasis on community rather than need.

The authors helped to develop and then participate in a Summer Lunch Program, sponsored by the Shippensburg Community Resource Coalition (SCRC), a collaboration between Shippensburg University and local community social service organizations, including the local library. The Shippensburg Summer Lunch Program (SLP) not only provides food for hungry children; this program is unique in that it also provides dynamic literacy programming organized in an inviting camp-like atmosphere for its participants. Moreover, the Shippensburg Summer Lunch Program is an open site, which means any child can participate, whether or not he/she qualifies for free or reduced lunch at their local public school. The Shippensburg SLP embodies the best practices for social development that James Midgley describes. According to Midgley, communities are best served by addressing the needs of all, not just of those in need. He writes, “Unlike social philanthropy and social work, social development does not cater only to needy individuals but seeks to advance the well-being of the entire population” (Midgley 1995, 29). The goal of the Shippensburg Summer Lunch Program is that all children in the community—no matter their socioeconomic status—will attend the program and experience the fun that should be a part of every child’s summer.

The Shippensburg Community Resource Coalition (SCRC) began in 2012 as a community-university partnership designed to meet social service and youth programming needs in a rural community where Shippensburg University is located. Shippensburg is in the unusual position of being split between two Pennsylvania counties, which can pose challenges for accessing social services in particular. While there are many services available in neighboring towns, it can be difficult for residents to access them due to lack of awareness, transportation, and/or their perceptions of these services. The SCRC is designed to help address these challenges in a variety of ways. One approach is for the SCRC to partner with neighboring organizations to expand and strengthen their services to the Shippensburg community in order to avoid duplication of services. However, some services have been developed directly by the SCRC. The Summer Lunch Program is one such example. The idea for the SLP was initiated when a board member, who is also a guidance counselor at the middle school, attended a workshop related to the USDA Summer Food Service program and gathered information about how these programs are operated. Masters of Social Work (MSW) students at the university then researched how to implement the program and developed a proposal as part of their course related to organizational development. The proposal was implemented the following summer of 2013 with four churches and SCRC; each church hosting one day of programming for the SLP. Thirty-nine students attended at least one day of the program, with closer to 5-10 attending each day during that first summer. The program has grown each year, adding participants, staff, and programming, with the most recent summer including ninety-nine children total with an average of sixty children each day.

When the SCRC Summer Lunch program began, its purpose was simply to feed hungry children, and in its first year, several local churches donated space so that the program rotated every day. In 2014, Summer Lunch began to grow in ways that brought literacy into focus. First, we were offered a stable full time location at the Shippensburg Public Library, and we were guaranteed library programming once a week. One of the first goals was to get every child a library card and encourage them to take out books. Second, our very first paid Summer Lunch Director, Martina Bartova, believed firmly that the programming should have an overall theme,

as it was in her childhood in Europe, and an adventure book seemed like the perfect way to coordinate all the program's activities. That first year, she chose *Treasure Island* as the theme and divided the Summer Lunch participants into teams. Right from the beginning of her tenure, Martina knew that making a camp atmosphere would encourage children to attend, and it would erase the stigma of coming to receive a free lunch. She explains that, "my goal was to make them WANT to come every day. Missing a day meant missing an activity or competition, i. e., missing precious points in the all-summer game. Since we were at the library, I got the idea that our theme could come from a book, ideally a classic adventurous piece, which we would read together throughout the summer."

By creating a summer camp environment and emphasizing the importance of community and team building exercises, Martina created a cadre of regulars who rarely missed a day, and effectively erased the stigma of receiving a free lunch. Martina ran the Summer Lunch Program for the next two years. In 2015, she picked *Around the World in 80 Days*, and in 2016, she chose *The Treasure of the Silver Lake*. Every year featured programming that highlighted the chosen book, and the program gained a reputation in the community for providing a camp environment. Many children attended who were not in need, and this mix of financial status further decreased the stigma of attending the Summer Lunch program. From Martina's perspective, the lessons became as important, or more important, than the food provided: "apart from feeding the children, a very, very important side of the program, I hope that I showed them how to spend summer time outdoors, what to play, how an old book can still have a lot to say, how there is adventure in every trip outside." Martina's vision—one that emphasizes community building activities that linked to a common book—became the foundation for the SCRC Summer Lunch program. The program continues to grow every year, and as the program grows, the Directors modify the community building activities to include more children.

Caitlin Clarke took over the position of Director in 2017, and she brought her own vision of literacy to the Summer Lunch program. As a school counselor, she was interested in the social lessons that the theme might offer the participants, and rather than adventure, she

wanted to emphasize recent texts that played with form and genre. For example, in 2017, the programming focused on “El Deafo,” an autobiographical graphic novel by Cece Bell that describes her experiences growing up deaf. According to Clarke, “kids of all ages could really resonate with this book in identifying what makes them different and celebrating it. Activities that tied to the novel included learning sign language, listening to an adult with an intellectual disability discuss his childhood, and taking turns writing affirmation notes for kids and staff.”

The focus for 2019’s Summer Lunch Program shifted to building social literacy through group interactions, projects, field trips and performances. When Sysha Irot became the Director in 2019, she chose Katherine Applegate’s *The One and Only Ivan*, a high-interest story based on true events about a captive gorilla to provide an inspiration for Summer Lunch activities that focused on understanding and building identity, expressing thoughts and emotions, and friendship. Participating in the activities within mixed-age and mixed-ability groups allowed the children to practice and develop social skills for successfully and respectfully interacting with each other, and to even form friendships with children they might not have otherwise met or socialized with before. The children and teens of Summer Lunch build a variety of social skills as they navigate different settings and groups, developing a sense of responsibility for their Summer Lunch community. For instance, Summer Lunch teens took the initiative to design and create rule posters for each area of the shared space to encourage all members of the Summer Lunch community to do their part in keeping the space clean and to take care of the shared materials. Summer Lunch children planned and created special thank you notes, paintings, and chalk art for guest presenters, and they expressed their gratitude to Summer Lunch staff members by actively participating in the preparation for and clean-up of projects and positively influencing their peers to do the same.

Sysha focused on creative self-expression as a form of empowerment, as it is in the book, through writing, the visual arts, and the performing arts. Summer Lunch participants explored identity and creative self-expression together with their peers through written introductions inspired by Ivan the gorilla’s introduction of himself in the story,

painting and drawing with different materials, building clay sculptures, exploring marbled shaving cream art, making rainbow zig-zag books, and constructing hats, as well as through trying out different forms of dance and playing theatre games. Summer Lunch children and teens also created a massive “The One and Only Summer Lunch” banner to display in the school and worked collaboratively to write positive messages for each other and express themselves on it. A Summer Lunch teen helper created the lettering for the banner and inspired many of the younger children to try their hand at lettering too!



Summer Lunch participants flourish in an environment that celebrates the unique and varied contributions of each person and promotes a shared vision of uplifting and encouraging others in a safe, non-judgmental atmosphere. This spirit of support is evidenced by the enthusiastic cheering and clapping that can be heard during each Behavior Awards ceremony, where children and teens are called out for specific, positive actions or contributions from that day and everyone shares in their accomplishments. The Behavior Awards are so popular that Summer Lunch participants are often on the lookout for good behavior and positive actions demonstrated by their peers so that they can nominate them for a Behavior Award. This encourages the intrinsic reward of publicly recognizing and celebrating the contributions of others. Focusing on the good builds morale as we try new things and learn, and it improves our outlook for ourselves and others. As Ivan remarks in the book: “Growing up gorilla is just like any other kind of growing up. You make mistakes. You play. You learn. You do it all over again” (Applegate 127).

BENEFITS TO STAKEHOLDERS: “WE ALL HAVE SOMETHING TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMMUNITY”

The Shippensburg Community Resource Coalition played a vital part in the creation and continued support of the program. However, there are a number of other local community organizations—both private and governmental—that provided ongoing support of the Summer Lunch Program. These organizations can be loosely grouped into the following categories: community churches, community charitable organizations, parent/teacher organizations, local businesses, the local public school board of directors, and the local university. During one of our interviews, one of the parent participants said, “we all have something to contribute to the community, and we can all learn from each other, and summer lunch definitely emphasizes that.” This quote encapsulates the sense of community that is a key part of organizing stakeholders around feeding children during the summer.

In the case of the Shippensburg Summer Lunch program, local churches provide support in the form of cash donations and additional food for snacks. Many of the volunteers at the Summer Lunch Program are also members of local churches. Parents who

attend these local churches are often the driving force behind the donations that come to the Summer Lunch Program.

Community organizations such as social and civic clubs make various types of donations and give support to the Summer Lunch Program. These organizations are generally most comfortable providing a cash donation to support the efforts of the staff and volunteers serving in the program. However, the Kiwanis organization bought the books that were the focus of the programming, local members of The Grange annually donate space on their property for three or four of the daily activities, and local Rotary International members provide snacks for the summer lunch students. Shippensburg Produce and Outreach, a local fresh produce food bank, also donated snacks in the form of apples or other produce to the Summer Lunch Program.

One of the Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO) at a local elementary school has a large number of students who participate in the Summer Lunch Program, and they provided a monetary donation to support the Summer Lunch activities. A number of non-profit and for profit businesses in the local community also provided funding and in-kind donations to the Summer Lunch program. In the past, the local library provided space for the Summer Lunch students and their activities. For some time now, a local orchard provides fresh fruit (peaches, apples, plums, cherries, apricots, etc.) and a local bottling factory provides enough bottled water for the entire Summer Lunch Program. More recently, the Shippensburg Area School District became the most prominent local partner to the Summer Lunch Program. The school board and administrators permit the students in the program to meet in their elementary or intermediate schools. The general consensus is that locating the program at a local public school building increases attendance and decreases any stigma that children may face who attend the program. For each of these organizations described here, their contributions to the Summer Lunch Program were vital to creating the sense that this program was definitely a community program. Their support helped the program to survive and, very importantly, grow the sense that this was a program for all children rather than just for “those kids,” which would have added to stigma.

RECIPROCITY AND PRIDE

The time and dedication to developing this network of supporters is key to long-term sustainability and success of the Summer Lunch Program. We have worked to develop trust with these partners so that they know that we use resources wisely, provide a safe program, and meet community needs. Evaluating the program's outcomes through research is an important piece of being able to tell the story of Summer Lunch and have evidence to support the effectiveness of the program. The research that was conducted also relied on the strong relationships and trust that we have worked to build with our community partners and participants.

In their article, "Accepting Roles Created for Us: The Ethics of Reciprocity," Katrina Powell and Pamela Takayoshi (2003) emphasize the importance of human relationships in research. They write, "at the heart of calls for reciprocity in research is a recognition/assertion/insistence that research involves building relationships among humans. At a basic level, research is about understanding other people, their lives, and their experiences" (Powell and Takayoshi 2003, 399). We believe that strong relationships within the SCRC Summer Lunch program is what made our program, and our research, so meaningful to us.

One of the unique aspects of this experience is the fact that the project involved both service and research in one combined effort. In order to make sure that we continued to value these relationships, we developed a research methodology that would incorporate participant voices loudly and clearly. This approach gave both the participants and the authors the opportunity to learn and grow as people. It opened up doors for some and gave others a wide view of their community. One of the authors, Gabrielle Binando, was awarded an undergraduate research grant that gave her the opportunity to sit down and talk with some of the parents who participated in the program. In order to ensure that relevant ethical guidelines were followed during the project, prior to completing interviews or filling out surveys, all participants provided written consent to be involved in the research, and all research endeavors were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Shippensburg University.

The parents learned a lot about the community, and they noticed changes within their own children from their participation in summer lunch. One parent in particular expressed to us that they “have learned all about the great opportunities, and that there is a lot of things that the community offers compared to other communities.” For parents that have never participated in SLP before, it was a great way for them to get involved and see what can be done for the community. During the interviews, some of the parents expressed how surprised they were when they found out about all the different pieces of the community puzzle: “and the basketball coach at Shippensburg University to come and participate. I was just blown away, and I think that by living here and getting into this type of thing I’m learning how, not close knit, but how behind each other this community seems to get. It is more of a ‘oneness’ and less of a clique feeling here.” The parents seemed to be thrilled to find out how other aspects of the community are involved in SLP. For us, this was not just a way to feed children; it was a way to form an unbreakable bond. “I was really surprised at how much, not necessarily the community, but the community people involved in other aspects of the community have come and participated here.” One parent in particular did her part to give back to the community in an immense way; she first participated in SLP as a mother who brought her kids so that they would learn, have fun, and have lunch. She was so moved by the program that she wanted to be more involved. This mother joined the SLP team as the Assistant Director after only participating for one year.

In a recent article articulating the importance of reciprocity, Sarah Stanlick and Marla Sell (2017) argue that community activists can fall under the spell of the “superhero mentality,” and then start believing that only they hold the power to make positive changes in their community. Stanlick and Sell contend that this belief is a dangerous one, and one that we can avoid if we develop a strong sense of collaboration as we build projects and programs together. They write,

“The role of follower or nurturer is implicitly or explicitly discouraged, and a power dynamic is thus created that elevates single individuals into the role of hero. The value placed on that role is wrapped up in the ideal image of ourselves as helpers. This

superhero mentality can lead to bold action, but it can also relegate others—often, community partners—to the role of sidekick, or worse, recipient. The Service Learning Community Engagement movement aims to identify this problem and to avoid the superhero mentality. Instead, programs can focus on connecting and sustaining relationships, with the goal of collective empowerment at the forefront” (Stanlick and Sell 2017, 82).

We believe that the SCRC Summer Lunch program has developed a strong ethos of collective empowerment, so that all participants believe that they have something to offer that will strengthen and sustain the Summer Lunch program. We learned, through observation and interviews, that parents felt an increasing sense of ownership in the program. Many volunteered to help when we were short-staffed, and two parents applied for Assistant Director positions, and in effect, transformed their ownership into leadership positions within the program.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

If someone were to put fun on the typical pyramid depicting Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs, it would likely go somewhere above Physiological Needs and Safety Needs. The Summer Lunch program provides students with some of those lower level needs so that they possess the psychological wherewithal to engage in meaningful, literacy-based activities during the summer months. The program provides educational and other programming to help children with other, higher level items on Maslow’s Hierarchy, such as Belongingness and Esteem. Moreover, the program creates an inclusive environment that minimizes stigma. It also encourages reciprocity between the local community and university. The program provides a sense of oneness that helps to support all the people within it, filling the hungry mouths, minds and hearts of our participants.

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Laurie Cella is a Professor of English at Shippensburg University. She coordinates the First Year Experience Program with her colleagues Steve Burg and Javita Thompson. For the past 5 years, she has worked with the Shippensburg Community Resource Coalition to build, support and sustain the Shippensburg Summer Lunch Program, a community collaboration that creates an engaging camp atmosphere designed to reduce the stigma associated with food insecurity. Her research interests are wide and varied; she has published essays on rural American women, service-learning projects, humorous memoir, motherhood and academia, and most recently, a book focused on working-class women's radical romances in the early to mid 20th century. She lives in Shippensburg, PA. with her husband and two children.

Michael Lyman is a Professor in the Department of Social Work and Gerontology at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania. He has a PhD in Social Work and MSW from the University of Utah and a BS in Psychology from Brigham Young University. Over the past ten years, he has been collaborating in various research projects around topics associated with food insecurity and related food issues. This includes work with the co-authors in this article involving a summer food program that his own children have attended for many years. He also serves on the board of a local fresh produce food bank and has published research about the demographics of the recipients of this food bank in the past. Another interest is research mentorship with students, which provides many opportunities- such as this project- to produce, present, and publish research with students.

Liz Fisher is a Professor in the Department of Social Work and Gerontology at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania. She has a PhD and MSW from University of Maryland and BA in Social Work from Millersville University. Dr. Fisher is a co-founder of the SCRC and continues to serve on the board.

Sysha Irot was the 2019 Director of Shippensburg Community Resource Coalition's Summer Lunch Program and the Summer Lunch Assistant in 2018. She previously partnered with the Summer Lunch Program through her Director of Youth Services position at Coy

Public Library of Shippensburg to provide library programming and services to Summer Lunch participants from 2014 to 2017. She has a BA in Sociology from Oberlin College and is planning to complete her Master's in Early Childhood Education from Shippensburg University. Since 2018, Sysha is a Lead Teacher in the Head Start Program for First Start Partnerships for Children and Families.

Gabrielle Binando was an undergraduate research student at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania. She received her BA in Psychology from Shippensburg University (May 2019). Gabrielle had the privilege of working with the Shippensburg Summer Lunch Program for two consecutive years where she was able to see, first hand, the growth of the participants. She was also a two year fellow for the First Year Writing course that Dr. Laurie Cella taught at Shippensburg University during the fall semesters. In the spring semesters, Gabrielle was a writing tutor available to all Shippensburg University students. Gabrielle currently works as a Client Services Operations Associate at Econ Wealth Management in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

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