

The Spirit of Generosity

Service Learning in a Pre-Service Teacher Education Program

The Circle of Courage is a traditional Native American philosophy of life. It is based on the premise that in order for children, adolescents, and adults to thrive they must be encouraged and supported in four essential values; belonging, independence, mastery, and generosity. These four core needs motivate individuals to reach their potential. Classrooms can either encourage and advocate this growth or create an atmosphere that stagnates and diminishes the spirit. The classroom is not a neutral place (Brendtro, 1998).

A sense of belonging is established when students form relationships within family, school, and community. Potentially all of these factors work collectively to form our belief that we belong. When they are dysfunctional, attachment issues occur and a world full of broken belongings is the result. In desperate search of forming bonds students turn to gangs and cults or they remain lonely and isolated (Brendtro, 1998). The spirit of belonging can be nourished in our schools. Classroom communities where students support each other, have fun, and work co-operatively build relationships (Kohn, 1996).

Independence is developed as students turn from irresponsible behavior to responsibly independent behavior. Students that feel powerless, dependent, and at the mercy of others, become aggressive or submissive in order to cope. Finding a

balance between autonomy and undeveloped independence is fundamental.

Students need to be encouraged to take responsibility for their own decisions and actions while being provided with support when unprepared to proceed.

Individuals that receive guidance while being given appropriate levels of responsibility exhibit self control, individual freedom, and confidence (Brendtro, 1998; Woolfolk, 2001).

The desire to learn is innate, it is a driving force in our existence. As humans we have a passionate need to understand and control our world; to gain a spirit of mastery of our environment. Mastery is cultivated in experiences that facilitate success and knowledge. Students that constantly face failure and criticism quickly define themselves as inadequate (Brendtro, 1998). Key components in curbing feelings of inadequacy and promoting a sense of mastery are active learning, cooperative learning groups, and stress free, fun surroundings (Armstrong, 2000; Marzano, 2001; Wolfe, 2001).

A spirit of generosity is based in unselfish and giving behavior. Children are egotistical by nature and need to be encouraged to care. Perspective taking is the first step in becoming a caring person. Seeing the world through other's eyes enhances the ability to be empathetic; ultimately leading to altruistic behavior. Contributing to others supports altruistic behavior, opening up self-centered tendencies and allowing for a more fulfilling existence. School and life experiences that support this basic human need foster individuals with high self-

esteem, capable and willing to give back to others (Brendtro, 1998; Kinsley, 1995).

Service-learning is a powerful way for pre-service teachers to develop a spirit of generosity. A breath of life can be drawn into the traditional classroom when students contribute to their community. Service-learning is more than just student volunteering. It is incorporating their educational background into service. The broad intended outcome of service-learning is to blend service and learning so that the service reinforces the college students' understanding of the learner and educational practices, and in return the learning improves and strengthens the service they can provide as teachers. Empathy and feelings of altruism are developed through the journey. The ultimate goal behind this movement is to create teachers who are better prepared as educators (Erickson and Anderson, 1997).

Although research in this area is limited, service-learning has been found to have a positive impact in preparing pre-service teachers. Roots (1994) found pre-service teachers benefitted from service-learning experiences. College students' values and attitudes were positively impacted, preparing them to take a more appropriate professional stance. Seigel's (1995) research indicated pre-service teachers involved in service-learning as part of a course on diversity were more tolerant than pre-service teachers that took the same course without the service-learning component.

The purpose of this research was to quantitatively and qualitatively examine the impact of service-learning on secondary pre-service teachers involved in an Adolescent Development course. In essence, the question is does service-learning build a spirit of generosity in pre-service teachers, therefore preparing them to be better teachers.

Subjects

Eighty-three students enrolled in a South Dakota college were involved in the study over a two year period. All students were enrolled in an Adolescent Development course as part of the requirements of their secondary education major or elementary major with a middle school endorsement. One of the requisites of the Adolescent Development course was a service-learning experience. The service-learning experience took place at a middle school after-school program. An after-school program was chosen because it complemented the Adolescent Development course goal of providing a holistic view of the adolescent, not just an academic profile, and it supported a community need.

The after-school program runs from approximately 3:30pm until 6:00pm. Students involved in the programs attend on a voluntary basis with no financial charge. A primary goal of the program is for students to have fun while they develop positive peer and adult relationships.

At-risk adolescent behavior is a concern in rural states, as well as urban areas. The service-learning focused on two middle schools where seventy-five

percent of the students that qualified for free and reduced lunches in the school district were enrolled. In addition, the population in both schools was transient with a large number of families living in homeless shelters, trailer parks, and low-income apartments. One of the middle schools provided the Limited English Proficiency program for the entire school district, serving students from twelve different countries.

Juvenile arrests for violent crimes involving aggravated assault and robbery dramatically increased between 1990 and 1998 in this community. Of particular significance was a 200 percent increase among 7 to 14 years olds. SD police records show that between 1998-2000, the very years the after-school programs were initiated, crime for 11-14 year olds between the hours of 3:30pm and 6:00pm were reduced by 42%. The police attributed this to the after-school programs.

From their conception the after-school programs have looked to grants and volunteers for their primary support. The college students were an important source of help to sustain the programs.

Procedures

Students in the Adolescent Development course were required to spend eight hours during the semester in the after-school program. While at the program their objective was to interact, supervise, and initiate activities with the middle

school students. Each college student kept a reflection journal during the semester. Reflection was the key to gaining meaning from the service-learning experience (Kinsley, 1996). The reflection journal was to be filled with their observations, concerns, random thoughts, and questions about adolescent development. The journal was not to be merely a log of times and tasks. Its focus was to include the general themes covered in the course. Culminating reflections centered on the question, "How will your service-learning experience impact your future teaching?" The journals were collected on the last day of the college course.

In addition to the journal, students completed a survey to determine their perceptions and attitudes toward the service-learning experience. Students responded to twelve items concerning their views of service-learning and how it contributed to their education. A four-point Likert scale was used to judge responses on a continuum from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." A space was also provided for additional comments.

Results

1. Seventy-two per cent (72%) agreed or strongly agreed the experience enabled them to have a better understanding of the adolescent. A common sentiment was reflected in this students' words, "This experience has given me a whole new outlook on today's adolescents. It is one thing to have speakers come in and tell

us what adolescents are going through and it is another thing to hear it from the adolescents themselves.” Another student reflected, “I have learned that educators need to be aware of their students and what may be going on outside their school lives. I believe there is nothing wrong in tailoring a student’s education to fit the circumstances surrounding their lives.”

2. Eighty-two percent (82%) of the college students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they gained different information as compared to other educational internships. This is reflected in the student comments, “I think it would be worthwhile if more of our classes required things like this. It is different working with students in a non-academic setting - insightful” and “It is one thing to have speakers come in and tell us what adolescents are going through and it is another thing to hear it from the adolescents themselves.”

3. Seventy-six percent (78%) agreed or strongly agreed the general class topics could be observed in action in the after-school program. These themes were then rated on a Likert scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being a very low connection between the college class and the after school program and 4 being a very high connection between the two.

Table 1

TOPIC	very low	low	high	very high
	1	2	3	4

Adolescent Theorists	18%	45%	31%	6%
Puberty/Physical Development	0	7	41%	52%
Gender Issues	2%	17%	45%	36%
Peers/Friendship	1%	1%	27%	71%
Adult Relationships	7%	34%	41%	18%
At-risk Behaviors	13%	24%	43%	20%

Table 1 reveals that students saw a particularly strong connection between the college class and the service-learning in the areas of puberty/physical development, gender issues, and peers/friendship. The area where the least association between the after-school program and the college course was apparent was the area of the adolescent theorists.

4. Fifty-one percent (51%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the reflection journal enabled the college students to analyze and evaluate the adolescents. Their ambivalence is evident in that this area was least well received of all areas surveyed.

5. Eighty-one percent (81%) agreed or strongly agreed the service-learning experience enhanced the Adolescent Development class. The sentiment is reflected in this students' comment, "I thought it was a great way to connect what we have learned in class to real life situations" another student said, "Great method of enhancing material, class discussions, lecture, and learning."

6. Seventy-eight percent (78%) agreed or strongly agreed they would recommend the service-learning experience be continued in the Adolescent Development class. The main reservation voiced about inclusion of the service-learning component in the course requirements centered around finding time in their busy schedules, as one student said, "It was hard to work in the hours, but over all it was really a very worthwhile experience."

7. Seventy-three percent (73%) agreed or strongly agreed the experience enabled them to have a better understanding of themselves as a future teacher working with adolescents. The variety of information learned from the experience is reflected in the following comments:

* "I have learned that you won't get very far with an authoritarian role in working with adolescents. Teens tend to get antsy and angry with power hungry adults. You have to be a good listener, understanding, and a positive role model."

* "The biggest thing I have learned is that I'm not superman. I get arrogant sometimes dealing with students and teaching. I learned that I don't know how to handle every situation. Students are so much more diverse than I ever imagined."

* "I have learned to have an open-mind, open arms, and open ideas for students who are searching for a place to be in the world."

* "Most of all, I have learned to love adolescent students and what they are about. You can guarantee that no day with them will ever be like another and you can't survive if you don't have an open mind and a good heart."

*“I think the biggest impact it will have is to remind me that I won’t ever really know the whole story of what is all going on in a students’ life and how it affects him/her in the classroom. My experience will be a strong reminder to never judge a student.”

Conclusion

Service-learning supports a spirit of generosity. By mentoring at the after-school program pre-service teachers immersed themselves in the unique world of the middle schooler, witnessing first hand their issues, humor, and complexities. Observations, interactions, and reflections provided a more holistic view of the adolescent, enabling the college students to imagine and realize the variety of feelings and actions of their future students. This ability to take the perspective of the adolescent is the source of building empathy and subsequent altruism. This experience countered self-absorption, encouraging caring and generous professionals.

Contributing their time and knowledge at the after-school program created a more fulfilling college classroom experience. Adolescent Development course content, supported by unselfish behavior exhibited in the service-learning, made the course more relevant. There was consensus that a more meaningful education was gained, better equipping them as future teachers. Not only did the service-learning component enhance the subject matter, but it also reinforced their confidence in creating a classroom that would be compatible with adolescents.

Service-learning was a viable addition to their pre-service teacher education.

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