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Melvin J. Pedras
University of Idaho

Jennifer J. Olson
University of Idaho

Kim Flottemesch
Lewis-Clark State College

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Educational Leadership Through Service-Learning

Melvin J. Pedras, Ed.D.
University of Idaho

Jennifer J. Olson, Ph.D.
University of Idaho

Kim Flottemesch, Ph.D.
Lewis-Clark State College

ABSTRACT

Leadership is the ability to envision connections and inspire change. The University of Idaho, College of Education is engaged in a project to integrate service learning into coursework for educators. These efforts are designed to inspire the leaders of tomorrow to link formal learning with community needs. The purpose of the study is to discuss the use of service-learning as a leadership strategy to help teachers become independent learners continuously seeking to integrate community concerns with educational needs. The authors discuss how to partner with community organizations, both public and private, to augment university coursework in education. Results of a survey of participants will be reviewed with discussion of implications for teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership can be defined as the ability to envision connections and inspire change. Leaders align people and motivate others (Kotter, 1996). It is incumbent upon higher education faculty to model and teach the necessary behaviors that will prepare the next generation of learners to contribute to and be involved with society. One such behavior is service. According to Covey (1989), "There is an intrinsic security that comes from service, from helping other people in a meaningful way." With the new millennium upon us, it is right for education to seek to contribute to leadership issues that will result in contributions to society at large. The question before us now is how can we model and inspire others to be of service to others.

Several decades ago, the American philosopher, John Dewey pondered the best ways to combine what students learned in school with what they experienced in their lives, in other words, how to make education meaningful to them (Stanford, 1999). Service-learning is a teaching method that assists teachers in helping themselves and their students relate classroom

learning to real community concerns and issues. Service-learning is one of the most promising new strategies for connecting education to life through teaching, learning, community building and youth development. With its focus on powerful connections among schools, communities, businesses, government and non-profit organizations, service learning can lead the way in an increasingly interconnected world.

Until recently service or volunteerism has been a seldom used concept. Now it is readily apparent in the foundation work of such corporate leaders as Bill Gates and Ted Turner. These enormously successful businessmen are turning their resources and talents to service, to improving the lives of the less fortunate, and in turn strengthening the communities in which we all reside. Additionally, President Clinton has asked for and received support from Congress to create and maintain the Ameri-Corps Program. Similar to the Peace Corps, students work in community service within the United States for one year in exchange for tuition assistance with college in the years following the year of service. Many times these future leaders of our communities work in their area of academic interest

thereby expanding their education with the practical application that can only be gained through direct service. This character building and educational experience can be partially replicated with students who may not be able to give a year of service by integrating service learning projects into university coursework.

The University of Idaho, College of Education, is engaged in a project to integrate service-learning into coursework for educators. These efforts are designed to inspire the leaders of tomorrow to link formal learning with community needs. Previously, teacher education has drawn heavily from the traditional methods of teaching to prepare future educational leaders. While this approach is not necessarily bad, it may not be the most effective way of preparing education students for service in the public schools (Pedras, Heide, Flottemesch, & Goc Karp, 2000). The issues faced by the teachers of today far exceed the demands of just a decade ago. Schools have become more closely aligned with social services such as breakfast and lunch programs for low-income children and after school care for children of working parents. In addition, schools and the business communities are linking to increase learning opportunities for future employees by financing computer labs and Internet linkages. Future teachers must be prepared to not only inspire and teach content and inspire innovation, but to link their instruction to the opportunities and demands of communities.

Service-learning assists future teachers in helping themselves and their students relate classroom learning to community service. Initial research studies have shown that service-learning is a positive teaching strategy stimulating interest in subject matter that would otherwise be difficult for students to internalize. Studies have also shown that this pedagogy can help teachers in training to understand the moral and civic obligations of teaching. According to Erickson & Anderson (1997) these obligations include fostering lifelong civic engagement, being able to adapt to the needs of learners with diverse and special needs, and being committed to advocacy for social justice and for children and families. With this in mind, University of

Idaho education faculty have integrated a service learning component into the first core course required of all teacher education majors. This project was started spring, 1999 in a course called *Diverse Learners in the Schools: Social and Cultural Contexts (ED201)* and is in its second full year of implementation. Partnerships were formed between the University of Idaho, local schools, community agencies and service organizations to identify and provide opportunities for service-learning. Examples of the type of partners included: the local Lyons Club, American Legion, VFW, Moscow Community Action Agency, Head Start, Boy Scouts of America, Moscow Recycling Center, Moscow Parks and Recreation, Habitat for Humanity and the Moscow Fire Department. In concert with these organizations students identified a particular need in the community and then engaged in problem solving strategies to meet the targeted need. Incumbent to this process was the identification and recognition of combining community resources to meet the needs of the identified target population. This expanded approach allowed students to gain an even broader sense of the community fabric that supports its members. Some students organized other volunteers, others wrote mini-grants to corporations and foundations to request financial assistance for a segment of their proposed project. Most importantly, students were required to link the identified need with current resources.

METHODOLOGY

Service-learning was introduced in the College of Education, University of Idaho, in the spring of 1999. This concept was integrated into a core curriculum course, required by all undergraduate education majors. To date approximately 375 students have been involved in this project. A survey on student reactions to their participation was developed and circulated to students at the end of each of the three semesters. This survey asked students to reflect upon the service-learning project and to discuss the challenges of the experience, what changes they had experienced in themselves, and recommendations for future implementation. The data con-

tinues to be collected to assess the impact and to make program adjustments (Heide, Flottemesch, Pedras, & Goc Karp, 2000).

Researchers, utilizing the methods of inductive analysis and constant comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), analyzed all responses. First responses were examined separately and, sorted into initial categories. Second, researchers compared categories and inclusion rules and produced a mutually agreed upon set of categories and rules. Third, investigators again separately examined the responses placing the data into the new set of categories. Finally, the researchers compared their separate categorizations of their responses. Discrepancies between investigators regarding proper categorization of data were discussed until 100% agreement was reached.

FINDINGS

First and foremost, the number of community partners who are willing to participate in the service-learning project has doubled over the past year. They report their genuine enthusiasm for the project and are committed to future participation due to the positive outcome of student involvement. The students themselves also indicated their satisfaction and a sense of personal growth. The initial findings of this research give cause for optimism that service-learning will provide teacher education students with another viable tool to enhance their ability to be leaders in schools and communities of tomorrow (Heide, et al, 2000).

A qualitative analysis of their impressions indicated a range of emotions. They voiced excitement, apprehension and some trepidation. Students also indicated a sense of challenge in choosing an appropriate topic and organizing their time to meet the demands of the project once selected. When discussing the changes they experienced, many remarked on the powerful influence of the service-learning project. In the words of a few students:

“I have learned that I can relate to all types of people and all ages. I have learned that I can forget about myself and focus on others who don’t normally get the attention they need or deserve.”

“I think the service-learning project changed my perspective on how caught up we are in the world. When I went in to the nursing home, it was a really lonely and cold place...I think more needs to be done for the patients...”

These words are similar to those spoken by successful business and organizational leaders when asked to describe their leadership accomplishments (Posner, 1997).

Leadership accomplishments are only one aspect of educational innovation. Richmond and McCroskey (2001) cited that the ideal leader in business and industry must be versatile. In other words, they must be able to adapt to the needs of others. Future leaders in education must uphold this same characteristic when working with a wide variety of students. Understanding the diversity of cultural and socioeconomic issues in education is of utmost importance to the educational leader. Further analysis of the data suggests that preservice teachers, through active participation in service-learning strategies, have identified the need for versatility. Preservice teachers responded:

“Personally I have learned how valuable and important service-learning projects will be to me throughout my teaching. I enjoy seeing the excitement of new ideas being brought forth by the children and letting them take on different challenges.”

“I learned I have to think ‘outside of the box’ to get ideas for what to do.”

“...I think they are not used to doing these kinds of things and it needs to be implemented more in the curriculum.”

Students have begun to understand the importance and necessity of reaching a diverse population of learners through versatility in teaching methods. Through managing and conducting service-learning in the first education core course, preservice teachers are recognizing the viability of this type of teaching methodology. The framework and foundation being established early in their educational career is

paving the way for greater understanding of their role as leaders in the field and community.

DISCUSSION

Overall, service-learning builds future leaders in education and the communities they serve. The experience intimately involves future teachers in the needs of the community in which they are learners. It affords them with the opportunity to look outside themselves and become more attentive to the needs of others. It offers them a process to replicate in future employment settings. Efforts such as these will build a network of numerous acts of service in a wide variety of communities. Individual efforts then become a tapestry of service linking schools and community. Individual and collective efforts result in a society ready to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Posner (1997) investigated conditions that foster leadership among successful corporate executive officers. He asked what five or six words would they use to best describe the character of your personal-best leadership experience? The words most frequently used by leaders were challenging, rewarding and exciting. Words signifying inspiration such as uplifting, inspiring, motivating and energizing also appeared frequently. These are words that future teachers use when describing service learning opportunities. Kanter, a Harvard Business School Professor, in her classic research investigated the human resources practices and organizational designs of innovation producing organizations. She wanted to know what fostered and hindered innovation in the U.S. corporations. We might ask the same question of our educational institutions (Kanter, 1983).

Kantor's research concluded that leadership is inextricably connected with the process of innovation, of bringing new ideas, methods, or solutions into use. Similarly MacGregor Burns (1978) concluded an analysis of the subject by saying, "The ultimate test of practical leadership is the realization of intended, real change that meets people's enduring needs."

Service learning can give future teachers the foundation upon which to build and a commit-

ment to promoting real innovation in the field of education. An innovation that links schools with communities as partners can create real change to meet the real people's needs.

SUMMARY

As preservice teachers prepare for the field of education, it is necessary that they embrace the tools applicable for effective leadership within the schools and their communities. Service-learning can give future teachers the foundation upon which to build and a commitment to promoting real innovation in the field of education. However, more than just a beneficial innovation is necessary for its diffusion and adoption to occur (Rogers, 1995). It is the leadership and commitment of participants from the school and community who contribute to the successfulness of the project. An innovation that links schools with communities as partners in the learning environment can create leadership opportunities that will meet real needs.

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Dr. Melvin J. Pedras is a professor of education in the Department of Teaching, Learning and Leadership at the University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho 83844. He is also the editor of this journal. Email: mpedras@uidaho.edu

Dr. Jennifer Olson is an associate professor of special education in the Department of Teaching, Learning and Leadership at the University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho 83844. Email: jenn@uidaho.edu

Dr. Kim Flottesmesch is an assistant professor of communication in the Division of Office and Business Technology at Lewis-Clark State College, Lewiston, Idaho 83501. She is also a member of the consulting editorial board for this journal. Email: kflottem@LCSC.edu