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Research exercise: The Difference We Make is in the Doing

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The Difference We Make is in the Doing

A Social Justice Learning and Living Cohort Community Project

2012 Service Learning Experience

Abstract

As participants in the Social Justice Learning and Living Cohort, we have the opportunity to help build and improve the community we live in. Our Cohort's mission is to spread literacy. An opportunity we had to serve the local community was by working with elementary-aged students. We encouraged their learning and helped them strive to reach their educational goals by assisting them with their reading skills. The non-profit agency Project READ taught us necessary techniques to work with younger students K-8th. We were then placed in an afterschool tutoring program at the Holy Angels Elementary School. Our mission there was to help improve the students' vocabulary and ability to read. By developing personal relationships with our students we were able to encourage their learning and become positive role models. We did a variety of activities with the children to improve their reading. We used block letters to spell different words, we read back and forth with each other, we worked through spelling books, and we did letter flash cards. The children seemed to really enjoy the hands on activities. As Social Justice Students, we believe that all people in a society should be able to read and write. In our presentation we will reflect on how the combination of our service learning, the classes we have taken in our cohort, and our training by Project READ helped improve literacy in the surrounding community. As UD students we will also explore the importance of our work in the context of the Marianist ideals of Lead, Learn and Serve

The Building Communities for Social Justice LLC is a learning community that grows out of the University of Dayton's Marianist commitment to educate for service, justice, and peace. We lead, learn, and serve.

Holy Angels Elementary School is a vibrant education ministry of the Parish committed to challenging our students to grow in faith and excel in academics within a caring Christian environment



Students at Holy Angels used these banana letters as a fun way to practice their spelling words.



Our tutoring experience was organized by Project READ with literacy being the main focus.



The Holy Angels Elementary school is located at the edge of UD's campus.



We were encouraged to assist the students in learning the spellings and meanings of the weekly words.

The Cave

Throughout this semester, our group has been tutoring while we have simultaneously been studying Plato's *The Allegory of the Cave*. This allegory parallels our work with our students. Our students, like the man in the cave, have been chained down by what they do not know or what they have not experienced. The ultimate goal of education is to learn more than what we have known before. As tutors, our role is to help the students to remove the chains of inexperience and model a new understanding of the role of education.

Unlike the prisoners in the cave who do not have an advocate or mentor, we encourage our students to take risks and to move beyond the "cave" of their current experience. Once the prisoners were released from the Cave, they had the potential of a new and richer understanding of the world that they were free to explore. Our students are like the prisoners. Education can free them from their cave. By being positive role models and mentors, we believe that we are showing them what can be accomplished by staying in school and being life-long learners. If we are sincere in developing personal relationships with the students we encounter, they will remember us and how we behaved. At best, we can encourage them, praise their efforts and acknowledge their progress. We are passing on what we have learned. *The Allegory of the Cave* is a timeless lesson. Service learning provides a natural way to pass along the wisdom of Plato's story. By tutoring and performing service learning, we are coming out of the cave as well. This service learning opportunity has created mutual relationships with the students, and it has overall given us a great experience.

A Theory of Justice

John Rawls was one of the most distinguished moral philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century. He is remembered for his theory of justice that was described in his book *A Theory of Justice*. His two basic ideas were the "original positions" and the "veil of ignorance." Rawls believed first and foremost in "justice as fairness" and that the rights of the individual should never be sacrificed for the greater good of society. The "original position" included the primary goods, freedom, equality, opportunity, wealth, power, and income. Rawls proposed that each person in the society must start in an "original position" which would mean they would have access to freedom, equality, opportunity, wealth, powers, and income. His second concept was the "veil of ignorance." Under this veil, members of society would make the right decisions about justice, opportunity, and access to the primary goods without knowing what position they hold in the societal structure. We were able to apply part of Rawls theory in our service learning experience tutoring students at Holy Angels Elementary School. As tutors, we were applying Rawls concept of fairness. We worked to make sure they could read at a grade appropriate level. The goal would be that they would eventually be able to read at an appropriate level to make informed decisions as voting citizens of the United States. The better these students are able to read and understand the challenges of their democracy the more access they will have to power and the opportunity to obtain wealth. We provided the students with a unique learning environment that best fit their needs and their learning style. Service learning is one way to apply the principles of justice. Everyone needs to be able to read and write in a democracy to have an equal say in the process of governing the country. People want an equal opportunity to access wealth and that comes by being educated and prepared to think critically. Our service is helping the next generation to be prepared by applying part of Rawls' theories. Every student deserves equal access to opportunities and by helping to improve their reading we are giving them a chance to succeed and be a productive member of society.

Outcomes

- Students did not only look at us as tutors but we became role models.
- Improved the students reading, writing, and spelling abilities.
- Shared the importance of building a community.
- Stressed the importance of receiving a good education.
- Incorporated Marianist Values in our tutoring techniques.

Reflection

Throughout our experience with Project READ and tutoring we learned that some tasks are easier to complete than others when dealing with students. Every student has their own unique learning style and it was our responsibility to figure out what it was. Some students were more reluctant to learn than others so we had to find creative ways to get and keep their attention. Some of the techniques we used were banana grams to help with spelling, flash cards to help with letters and sight words, fake money to help with counting, and dry erase boards for writing letters and numbers. We not only were tutors but we became role models. We taught them important skills such as taking turns and sharing. We also taught them time management. We rewarded their good behavior with high fives. When the students did not have any homework we had the opportunity to bond with them outside. We played kick ball, tag, and hide seek. The students really enjoyed the interaction with older students. On colder days when the students did not have homework we had the opportunity to help in the Elementary library. We would sort and cover new books. Once they were sorted and covered we could relax and just read to the students. Overall tutoring was a great experience. It was very rewarding when the students finally understood a concept we had been working on. We hope they continue to grow and continue with their education.