Experience Based Learning and Teacher Preparation: Camp Adventure Child and Youth Services ~ A Model Service Learning Program

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Active, experienced based learning, including service learning, has been identified as a central thrust in the ongoing pedagogical revolution in higher education (Rice 2011). Further, the desire among students to form peer-driven learning communities and “participate, contribute and take ownership” in their own development is shaping the future of higher education (Frey, 2011). This is the case in teacher education as well as other professional education and discipline-based programs. As a model of education, service learning combines the traditional classroom learning with life experiences, thus engaging students with the world outside the university and can be a powerful learning tool. (Carracelas-Juncal, Bossaller, & Yaoyuneyong, 2009).

For several decades, the University of Northern Iowa has operated in conjunction with several partnering universities a model service learning program known as Camp Adventure Child and Youth Services (CACYS). Designed as a leadership development program for college and university students, the program is also organized to enable access to the child, school age and youth care areas (Edginton, Gassman & Gorsuch, 2010). Over the life of the program, over 17,500 college and university students mainly drawn from individuals majoring in education and seeking a future career in the teaching profession, have participated, working primarily with children and youth of US military family members.

The newly postulated Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) continuum identifying effective teaching qualities serves as a framework for how the CACYS program assists in the preparation of individuals as teachers, especially to work with military family members. The TQP model recognizes needed transformational qualities to prepare teachers for
the 21st Century including preparing students for: 1) global citizenship; 2) leadership, collaboration and advocacy; 3) multiple ways of learning and teaching; and 4) the ability to deal with rapidly changing content (2012).

CACYS has been offered in 30 countries and US Territories. Predominately, students participating in the program work in overseas environments and are exposed to varied cultural experiences. Ruan et al (2011) and Lau and Edginton (2003) have studied the CACYS programs contribution to global understanding. Using Derek Bok’s, former president of Harvard University, framework for undergraduate education, Ruan and her colleagues have confirmed that participation in the CACYS program assists students in gaining greater understanding, sensitivity and awareness of the knowledge and skills necessary to function effectively in a global environment.

The US military is the most successfully formally integrated institution in America. Members of the US armed forces and their family members reflect a board range of races, ethnicities, orientations and backgrounds. The CACYS program enables students preparing as teachers to be exposed to and work with individuals of great diversity. In this way, individuals are encouraged to live and work with others with greater tolerance and understanding. Functioning effectively in a diverse environment is an essential quality of teaching.

Further, the CACYS program provides students with the opportunity to develop leadership skills including the ability to collaborate and create participant-centered learning environments in the informal setting. The CACYS program design encourages “choice” and “community building.” Thus, students, as leaders, work with children and youth to encourage self-directed learning, which meet the individual needs of participants, yet, at the same time, create an environment where all work together to build community. The informal nature of the environment provides opportunities for learning to occur at nearly anytime and anywhere for both the students as leaders and the children and youth. In fact, new perspectives of teaching and learning are gained because of the informal nature of the environment which encourages a more individualized approach to addressing the needs of participants. Curiosity, creativity and innovation are also prime desired program outcomes. Content is not focused in a particular area, but rather can be integrated across several topics.

Many leadership knowledge, skills and competencies are gained by students preparing to be teachers as a result of their participation in the CACYS program. In addition to gaining knowledge of face-to-face leadership, program designs, behaviour management, conflict resolution, risk management, program standards and others, students are also encouraged to embrace the vision, mission and values and traditions
of the program. Edginton et al (2010, p. 123) have suggested that the program’s learning environments have been described as dynamic meaningful and engaging; one’s that involve students in active leadership.

One of the key elements of service learning is the opportunity to engage in reflective practice. As CACYS has been designed as an academic program with credit, students are required to engage in multiple reflective projects throughout their experience. The power of praxis ~ that is, action with reflection ~ provides students with an opportunity to introspectively reflect on their experience and then change their behaviours in order to improve their performance.

The CACYS program effectively supports the preparation of students to become teachers. Many qualities of effective teaching are enhanced as a result of participation. The CACYS program is, in fact, a transformative program that provides students with the opportunity to gain new knowledge, skills and competencies directly related to leadership and teaching. In addition, the CACYS program promotes greater global sensitivity, diversity and self-awareness, especially as a result of the opportunity for reflection. As a powerful learning strategy, the CACYS model is one which supports learning strategies and the skills required by teachers to perform effectively in 21st Century learning environments.

References


