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12-1998

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Michelle R. Dunlap

Running Head: ADJUSTMENT AND DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES OF
STUDENTS

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Connecticut College

Abstract

In an effort to better understand the psychosocial and adjustment processes experienced by college students engaged in service learning, 22 randomly selected reflection journals were content-analyzed from a class of 44 child development students who had been engaged in service learning in a variety settings. Three of the themes that emerged in the journals involved students: feeling awkward during the first visits; feeling uncertain about redirecting children's misbehavior; and having ambivalent feelings when bringing their service learning experiences to an end. The coping mechanisms and resources upon which students draw to successfully grow beyond these initial challenges are discussed, as well as practical suggestions for facilitators of the service learning experience.

Adjustment and Developmental Outcomes of

Students Engaged in Service Learning

The purpose of this study is to present the psychological and adjustment processes that occur as students engage in service learning in the words or critical reflections of students. Content analyses of the student journals reveal many of the high points, low points, struggles and rewards that occur on a psychological level when they engage in service learning. Three of the issues or adjustment steps that will be discussed here involve service learners' initial adjustments within their placements (i.e., their beginnings), their later struggles involved in finding and balancing their roles with respect to the community members with whom they are engaged (i.e., their middle), and their closure processes as they ponder and facilitate bringing their service learning experiences to its finality (i.e., their endings). The prevalence of these issues within a sampling of student journals will be offered, along with the words and thoughts of students themselves on each of these three issues.

The Role of Critical Reflection

Critical reflection is an important component of the service learning process. Critical reflection is the process by which students attempt to grapple with or put into perspective the meaning of their learning, feelings and experiences associated with their service learning experience itself (Berson, 1997; Boss, 1994; Campus Compact, 1993; Forman & Wilkinson, 1997; Giles, Honnet, & Migliore, 1991; Howard, 1993; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Morton & Troppe, 1996; Wyatt, 1997). The focus of this paper is the processing and reflection that distinguishes service learning from volunteerism, particularly as it relates to working in child-related placements. Volunteering, interning, and experiential learning often do not require or include significant psychosocial reflection. For example, in some courses, teachers require students to write a brief summary of their experience rather than requiring them to engage in in-depth processing throughout the placement (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996).

Written and oral reflection time are crucial components of the service learning process (ACTION/NCSL, 1989; Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996; Goldsmith, 1993; Sigmon, 1994). The issues that are talked about during critical reflection time need further scholarly investigation and may be useful as a tool for understanding and assisting current and future service learners. The sharing of student critical reflections may: 1) assist instructors in becoming aware of and anticipating student issues; 2) help students to understand that many of their feelings, issues and experiences-- even the uncomfortable experiences-- are a normal part of the service learning process; and 3) help agency personnel to better understand the process of service learning from the perspective of students. Thus, the study of critical reflection journals may become a very important resource within the service learning process.

Service learning and critical reflection are integrated into all of my introductory child and life span human development courses. The intended service objective is for each student to contribute to the healthy development of children and/or families. The academic goal or objective of the service learning is for students to make as many connections as they can between basic course concepts and observed child behavior, as well as between real-life behavior and concepts taught in the course. Students choose one service learning environment from among the Human Development Children's Program laboratory school located on campus, as well as approximately 50 other child- or family- related sites located off campus such as inner-city after school tutorial programs, public school teacher assistant programs, and domestic violence shelters for caregivers and their children. Several measures are taken to assist students, and to maximize their comfort in the service learning process (see Dunlap, 1997; 1998a; 1998b).

According to previous literature, there are several issues that arise during service learning. Some of these issues include unrealistic expectations on the part of service learners; underdeveloped service learner skills; incompatibilities between service learners and clients; feelings such as boredom, disinterest, frustration, and disillusionment; and

incompatibility of the service learning expectations with student interests (ACTION/NCSL, 1989; Berson, 1997; Center for Academic Excellence, 1997; Eyler et al., 1996; Miller, 1997). Previous discussions of these issues do not appear to have been derived from systematic analyses of student journal entries or from some other means of systematic quantitative and qualitative analyses of concerns that students have voiced. Nonetheless, from reading student journals, it appears that the issues that arise for students as they engage in service learning are numerous. In order to gain a systematic, organized means by which to document the issues that arise for students, the following study was designed.

Method

At the end of the Fall 1995 semester, all 44 students enrolled in the introductory child development course were invited to submit their reflection journals for possible use in a study exploring college student adjustment in service learning settings. Their confidentiality and future anonymity were guaranteed. They were assured that their participation or refusal would in no way influence their course grades in accordance with the guidelines and approval of the Connecticut College Human Subjects Institutional Review Board and the Connecticut College Psychology Department Ethics Committee. Forty-three of the 44 students gave informed consent and written permission to have their journals included in the study. The journals ranged in size from 10 to 35 typed, double-spaced pages, with an average of 19.5 pages. Twenty-two (half of the class population) journals were randomly selected for qualitative analyses, resulting in 407 pages to be computer entered and content analyzed over the course of the next year. This collection of the 22 randomly selected journals appeared to be representative of the larger class of students, with the randomly selected journal participants ranging in age from 17-32 years, with 91% between the ages of 17 and 21. Seventy-seven percent of these participants were women and the other 23% were men. Forty-five percent of these students conducted service learning in elementary schools, 38% in preschool facilities on and off

campus, 14% in after-school tutorial programs; and the remaining 3% in other settings such as domestic violence shelters.

To protect the privacy of the participants, the journal transcripts were transformed into anonymous data sets, and were systematically analyzed using the "topical codes 2" method of content-analysis outlined in Bernard (1994, p. 197; see also Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994). The Topical Codes method in this case required the coding of each sentence of a journal entry for the presence or absence of major issues such as adjustment issues, closure issues, multicultural issues, and gender issues from a list of 85 themes that had been itemized a year earlier during the pedagogical reading of student journals. Consistent with the "topical codes 2" method, the appropriate codes were matched and assigned to each passage. For example, a journal sentence that read, "It was very difficult for me to get motivated for attending my service learning program today because it was to be my last day and I knew that I would really miss the kids, " was coded with a "C" for its content regarding closure issues. A passage that read, "The children gathered around me and hugged and kissed me good-bye, and although I was touched by this gesture, I wasn't sure whether it was appropriate to hug them back, especially those of the opposite sex," would be coded with a "C" for its content regarding closure, and also with a "GRI" for its content regarding gender issues, and an "HOA" for its content regarding the handling of affection. The original data coding was cross-checked among several data coders for accuracy and completeness. Discrepant codes, which emerged in 15% of the passages, were discussed by the research team and agreed upon.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Initial analyses of the 22 student journals revealed 85 themes or issues that arose for these students as they critically reflected upon their service learning. Regarding their service learning experiences, a sampling of these issues included: 1) feeling awkwardness, fear or uncertainty during visits; 2) adjusting to and building rapport with children, families, and staff in the placement setting; 3) being reminded of and reflecting

upon one's own childhood experiences as a result of observing children and families; 4) feeling that one's expectations were or were not matched in the placement; 5) feeling a range of emotions such as frustration, guilt, anger, overwhelm and disappointment regarding particular incidents experienced or witnessed; 6) feeling uncertain about placement expectations with regard to setting limits for and redirecting children's behavior; 7) having concern over child gender role development issues; 8) grappling with a range of multicultural issues; 9) feeling puzzled by behavior observed in the children or staff, and recognizing and struggling with one's own biases regarding children, families and cultures; and 10) coming to terms with the feelings and emotions associated with bringing the service learning experience to an end. There is thematic overlap in many of the issues, because many of the issues raised in the journal transcripts are not mutually exclusive of one another.

Three of the issues that will be discussed more in-depth here are: 1) adjusting to and building rapport with children, families, and staff; 2) understanding and clarifying placement expectations with respect to one's role in setting limits for and redirecting children's behavior; and 3) dealing appropriately with closure when ending the service learning experience. Each of these issues appeared, unsolicited, in 30-68% of the journal reflections that were analyzed. In the following sections, the incidence rate of each of these themes and samples of service learners' comments are presented. As mentioned earlier, these three issues represent student experiences in three adjustment periods of their service learning experience. The first occurring at the very beginning or during the basic adjustment period of their service learning experience. The second occurring more toward the middle of their placement period when they are grappling with specific types of interaction issues. And the last occurring toward the end of their placement experience as they are preparing to bring the experience to a close.

Theme 1: Initial Adjustments and Rapport Building

Sixty-eight percent of the participants reported feelings of awkwardness, self-doubt, or detachment with respect to the children, the teacher, the agency personnel, or the larger placement environment, especially during their first several visits. It is interesting that 80% of the subset of participants who reported feelings of awkwardness or other negative feelings also reported improvements in their comfort with their service learning placements within two to four visits. Representative initial comments of the students are as follows:

- I was filled with feelings of both excitement and nervousness. I knew that such a program was exactly what I was looking for, however, I can not hide that I was scared.

- I did not know exactly what I would be doing there. I felt uncomfortable with a few of the teachers, and I didn't want them to think I had no clue what I'm doing. I figured that I would either read stories or color with the children. I was a little nervous about the whole thing.

- Today was my first day... I must say that I was a little nervous. I remembered what my middle school was like. We were a bunch of kids who thought we were so cool and so tough... My point is, we would not really feel like having some 'snot nose' rich kid from a local college come try and help us in an after school program that we probably did not want to be in anyway... Actually, I would look up to and aspire to be this person, but I know most of my peers would not have... I was nervous, I did not want to screw up.

- Presently, I am very frustrated with the way my volunteer experience has begun. I feel as if I am not accomplishing what I had set out to do from the beginning and I find it very disturbing... I really do not feel any connection with the [children] at this point. I feel more like a machine doing what is expected than making a personal connection. I am sure a connection will come in time.

The tendency for things to improve in time is evidenced in many of the student reflections:

- I was terrified when I first arrived at the school. I was worried I would not be successful, that the children would get too frustrated, that no one would respond, or that the children would be too rowdy. It only took moments [after I arrived] before I relaxed and realized that the children were as excited to be there as I was.

- My second day was better than the first.

- Since I've become accustomed to going to [this elementary] school I have noticed that the children have also gotten used to me being around. I haven't been causing such a distraction when I come in.

- This [third] visit cannot be compared to the first and second visits in the least because it was just much more fulfilling than the other two. To begin with, the children were much more receptive of me.

- [In my last visit] I wanted to get to know these children, I wanted to feel like I'm getting something accomplished with them, I wanted to help them learn, and [in the last visit] it was a little rough. [But today] I felt very productive and full when I left.

Thus, the above incidence rates and comments indicate that feelings of discomfort and awkwardness were common in the first visits, but also that the majority of cases were quickly resolved. Such information could be very important for students who are feeling discomfort in those first visits and who may be personalizing the discomfort, and perhaps even contemplating quitting the placement because of it. Professors, college administrators and agency staff can use the above data to help themselves to anticipate and identify such feelings among service learners. When students indicate to faculty and staff their discomfort through their body language, their journals, or in their group processing, faculty and staff can reassure students that their feelings may be a very normal part of the service learning process and likely to subside within several visits. This kind of support may decrease the likelihood of a student prematurely terminating or switching their placement.

Theme 2: Issues of Setting Limits and Redirecting Child Behavior

Fifty-nine percent of the participants reported concerns regarding setting limits with or disciplining children. They reported tensions or conflicts between their desire to be a friend or pal to the child(ren) and their desire or expectation to be a caregiver or role model. Resolution of these tensions is not as clear and predictable as for the "awkwardness" theme listed earlier, but it does not seem to be an insurmountable challenge by any means:

- I have this little dilemma... I am not sure where the line is between my place as an authority figure or as just a friend. For instance, one boy was eating a [candy] and hid it right as I came over to him. I assured him I wouldn't turn him in (because you are not allowed to eat in the library), but should I have? I don't want the kids to resent me but I also want them to respect me. I'm just not sure. I probably should become more authoritative.

- Should I tell the children what is right or wrong or should I continue to act the part of a new toy until they get tired of me? I don't want to be the authority because [the teacher is] already there for that.

- Again, I do not know what to do. . . I do not want to come across too mean or too controlling, but I do need to maintain some control within the classroom. I just hope these children realize that I am not mean! . . I do not feel particularly comfortable disciplining the students, especially when their teacher is [right there] in the room.

- I think that maybe the best way to approach things. . . is to say something in a firm but not harsh voice, so the children know that you mean what you say. I find this hard to do because I'm still not exactly comfortable with the situation. Many of the teachers are a little more harsh than what I'm used to dealing with.

It is important to note that ambiguity regarding one's service learning role could arise regardless of the age of the community members with which the service learner is engaged. For example, these college age service learners could feel this same tension to an even greater degree when working with adolescents their own age. They could likewise feel confusion about their roles when working with adults older than themselves.

For example, a service learner may feel ambiguity about being in the role of "teacher" when tutoring a middle-aged or older adult in reading if they have been taught a certain amount of respect or reverence for adults and the wisdom of adults throughout their lives. Under such circumstances, they may struggle with the appropriate stance or approach for sharing their skills with someone expectantly "wiser" than they are. On the other hand, they erroneously may assume that one who cannot read is not wise. This struggle could be of particular significance if the service learner has not come to fully understand that book-learning and wisdom may run on separate continuums, and that having one does not necessarily mean having the other. Again, for those teaching, counseling, or supervising service learners, it is important to be prepared to validate students' concerns and to respond in a supportive manner as they struggle with finding their role and their appropriate place. One method of support is to assure the student who raises the issue that this experience and the feelings associated with it may be very common among service learners, and that with time, it will improve. These data also suggest that also it would be helpful to service learners for agency supervisors to be as clear as possible with students about placement site expectations regarding service learner roles, eliminating as much ambiguity as possible about what is expected of them.

Theme 3: Closure Issues in Service-Learning with Children

Thirty-six percent of the participants raised issues in their journals concerning closure. There appears to be a great deal of variability in how students think about and handle closure. Some students appeared to give a great deal of thought to the ending of the service learning experience as reflected by, for example, their having planned particular activities or small gifts for the children. Others appeared to treat their last day as any other. Some reported illness which necessitated their canceling their final day. A number of students made unsolicited comments to the effect that they desire to voluntarily continue their placement in the following semester. Some of the students' comments were indicative of the adolescent "personal fable" (Berger & Thompson, 1995,

p. 555; Dunlap, 1997; Elkind, 1967, 1984; Muuss, 1988; see also Miller, 1997) wherein they reflected on their service learning experiences and indicated that they expected to uniquely engage in heroic efforts that would have helped to "save" children they perceived as "needy." Others seemed to reflect upon and conceive of the service learning in more equitable or mutually beneficial terms than they did in the beginning. Examples of reflections regarding closure are as follows:

- Due to factors such as Thanksgiving and my bout with Bronchitis, I haven't seen the kids in what seems like years. I feel like any progress that I might have made has regressed. I have such a problem with closure and making everything right before I leave, but it would be absurd if I really thought I could come and fix all of these children's problems in a semester. Still, I feel somewhat failed in my attempt. At the end of the day this last time, the teacher told me how grateful she was to have me and how much of a difference I was making. She tells me that a lot and she seems to be genuine, but I wanted to make a difference in the children's lives, not the organization of the classroom... I feel like I barely touched on something and now have to let it go. I don't want to sound too defeated though. I learned so much from tutoring and if I made the teeniest difference in one child's life, than I guess I did something.

- However, today [one of the children with whom I am close] let me help him and it was really a great feeling. When we were finished I took him outside where his bus was and I got him all situated. He put his arms out and gave me a hug good-bye. I wasn't really sure whether or not he was going to be okay with my leaving. I know that he has problems adjusting to change and I was pleased when he didn't get mad or frustrated when I told him that it was my last day. I think that I would say that this experience turned out to fit my high expectations. I just reread my first journal entry about my expectations and I realized that I am so pleased with the way that things went. I established a very intimate one on one relationship and we learned a lot from each other. I am so pleased with the work that [this child] and I accomplished both together and apart. I am really going to miss that little boy!!!!

- Well I guess today kind of sums up most of my negative feelings about [my service learning placement at an elementary] school. It being my last day, I was a little sad because I really enjoyed spending time with the kids in the class. So as I am walking

up the stairs to my class I hear nothing, so I think that maybe they are having silent reading time. When I turn the corner into my room there is no one there. I walk into the adjoining class room thinking that they might be there, and no sign of anyone. I go back into my class room to look for a note or something, I find nothing so I walk across the hall into a teacher room. They tell me that my class had gone [on a field trip] for the day... so I left [the school] this afternoon most likely for the last time in disappointment knowing that I will never see the kids in my class again.

- I can't wait till next week. I'm really sad it is my last time. I have really started to form bonds with some of the kids. I think that I will try and return to the same classroom next semester [on my own volition].

As the comments above indicate, it is important that students be supported through the service learning closure process. Having discussions between the agency supervisors and other staff with service learners with regard to expectations, options, and plans surrounding the bringing of their placement experience to a close would be helpful to service learners.

Conclusion

The suggested purpose of exposing students and others to previous students' critical reflections is not to direct students into specific behaviors or responses in their work with children and other community members, but rather to offer examples and models of what it feels like to be a new service learner. This may help students to realize that many of their feelings are normal or are a normal part of the service learning process. The awkwardness that the majority of the service learners reported in their journals may be no different than the uncertainty that people feel as they begin a new course or when they have a faculty person with whom they've never had before for a course. However, knowing that such feelings of uncertainty and moments of awkwardness are a common part of the service learning process may reduce some of the anxiety that one may feel in such situation. Likewise, the fact that 80% of those reporting such awkwardness report greater comfort within 2-4 visits may be reaffirming in those moments when students

mistakenly over-personalize the discomfort, and contemplate withdrawing from their placements.

       The student reflection themes that emerged in this study also suggest that individually tailored orientations for each service learner might be helpful, if at all feasible. In addition, their reflections suggest that teachers, counselors, administrators and agency staff should make their expectations for service learners as clear as possible. However, in cases where facilitators are coordinating many placements, it may be difficult for teachers, college administrators, and agency personnel to offer orientations and specific objectives tailored to each service learner or to each placement location. Offering previous student experiences and reflections can in no way substitute for individualized orientations, but may be one of several methods that, when combined with other supports, would assist students in their service learning adjustment period and result in favorable outcomes. For example, combining traditional group orientations such as those facilitated by college volunteer offices with reflections from previous service learners and in-class group processing may further optimize student service learning. It is expected that hearing from previous service learners in the form of the sharing of their journal reflections will help to improve the comfort and effectiveness of the service learning process for those who are involved in facilitating or participating in that process. Offering reflections such as those above to all associated with the service learning process hopefully can enhance preparation and strengthen the service learning and academic course experience.

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Note

Biographical Statement

Michelle R. Dunlap, Ph. D., is an Assistant Professor of Human Development at Connecticut College. With a background in social psychology, she tends to focus on social and personality development issues. She has supervised the service learning of hundreds of students over the past four years, and is in the process of writing a book to assist students in their service learning work (release date: Fall, 1999, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers). She can be reached at Connecticut College Box 5322, 270 Mohegan Ave., New London, CT 06320-4196, USA (EMAIL: mrdun@conncoll.edu).