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4-23-2015

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Recommended Citation

Immelman, Timothy D.; McAnally, Cullen T.; and Saracco, Dino V., "Lutheran Social Services service learning project" (2015). *Celebrating Scholarship & Creativity Day*. 50.

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Lutheran Social Services Service Learning Project

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Background:

Lutheran Social Services (LSS) is an organization whose mission is to “express the love of Christ for all people through service that inspires hope, changes lives, and builds community.” A significant part of what they do involves leading afterschool activities that promote the learning of specific academic and life skills. Those learning objectives are as stated as follows: (1) working together, (2) communication, (3) following instructions, and (4) personal boundaries. As liberal arts students, we provide external perspectives regarding ways to enhance their four learning objectives.

Because they have our help in developing new leisure activities for their students, the LSS staff has more time at their disposal to focus on improving other aspects of the program. Our help in creating exciting new games was also useful simply because they were novel experiences for the children, coming from different sources than what they were used to; that is, the kids had the opportunity to experience various games they may not have played before. Additionally, the staff gained a new perspective on different follow-up discussion questions for the children after every game. Overall, our goal was to help make LSS a more fun and productive site in any way we were able to achieve. Those games help make the site an empowering setting by allowing the kids to participate in activities and share power in group activities. They also get to have fun doing it. The facility is a converted house. The project came about because the LSS staff needed different viewpoints on how to accomplish their learning objectives for their kids. They reported that it was great for the kids to experience new games from different standpoints.

Though our intervention was implemented at the Sauk Rapids LSS site, almost all of our work came from home. The project was designed for about 15 children aged 9 to 13 who were enrolled in Lutheran Social Services’ afterschool Kid’s Resiliency Program (KRP). The children

had either mental disabilities or learning disorders. They all have different interests and abilities; therefore, we created a host of different games in an attempt to satisfy all their needs. We visited the site to meet the staff and visually assess our population's needs.

We were provided with a number of different supplies including sports balls, arts and crafts materials, hula hoops, a jungle gym, and so on. We were informed of the children's abilities and were given four skill-focused outcomes as mentioned in the abstract. The games we created were not supposed to be overly competitive or rough. A template was provided specifying how the games should generally look. The project was a combined effort among our group members, and we periodically checked in with our supervisor to get her input and to make sure everything was going well and according to plan.

The Project

Our group got together and collaborated on how to make activities the children would enjoy while simultaneously learning valuable lessons. We all had our books and computers, and we helped each other find exciting games and adapt them in whatever way necessary. In addition, we collaboratively thought of different new aspects to add to the games, like fun new rules or interesting twists to make them more enjoyable, exciting, and player-friendly. When all three of us had compiled 20 games (for a total of 60), we formatted them into a 37-page booklet that we sent to our supervisor.

When developing activities, our team used the following resources: www.netmums.com, www.todayparent.com, www.fun.familyeducation.com, and *The Boys and Girls Club of Central Minnesota's Recreational Activity Guide*. The activities were derived from the aforementioned resources and were altered to meet our population's needs. The games closely relate to five of the seven core values of community psychology: (1) individual/family wellness

by promoting the mental health of our population, (2) sense of community by bringing our population together through fun activities, (3) respect for human diversity by creating a wide variety of games for different interests and strengths, (4) citizen participation by letting citizens like ourselves participate in change, and (5) collaboration and community strengths by working within our group and with our supervisor to achieve a common goal.

To come up with games that fit the needs for our population, we used a variety of different methods, the main two being (1) leisure activity catalogs and (2) online databases. We adapted our findings to fit the needs of our population by eliminating any winning or losing teams or individuals. After completing 60 games, we merged them all into one common format provided by our supervisor. Lastly, we got the opportunity to lead a few of our games with the children at the Sauk Rapids LSS site.

The fresh discussion points we offered helped the kids take something away from the game that they could apply to everyday life. With the different ideas and perspectives my group offered LSS, the kids got the opportunity to incrementally learn principles and skills that apply to them every day. We are thrilled that the kids can now participate in so many different fun and exciting activities. It is gratifying that they are so enthusiastic about playing the games we created and, most of all, they are learning many different lessons they can apply to everyday life. Further, our group was able to gain valued as community psychology experience within the confines of a semester-long course and the limited training of undergraduate students. That experience will go a long way in our future learning, as well as simply in our general knowledge and skills as good and productive citizens of the different communities we will encounter.

One minor obstacle we encountered was difficulty in finding time to meet. We all have busy and conflicting schedules, which forced us to work late into the night and on weekends to

complete what needed to be done. It was also difficult to create games that accommodated the children's particular needs. One requirement was to eliminate winners and losers. We wanted to make the games as fun and exciting as possible, but we also needed to reduce or eliminate competitiveness for the most part. For some of the games, it was difficult to make them interesting without winners and losers, so other twists were often added.

Thirdly, and most important, it was difficult to create games for a population we were not really familiar with. Because we did not have an adequate background check and LSS certification that cleared us to work, we were not allowed to have any contact with the children; therefore, it felt like there was a divide between us and the population we were serving. LSS is extremely strict with that rule. The extent to which we were allowed to interact with the children was insignificant; we were not permitted to do anything except say hi to them. We believe it would have been easier to understand what the kids wanted if we had been allowed to have more direct contact with them.

This aspect of the project was frustrating for our group. We felt like we could have done more for LSS had we been able to interact with the children. This is the main aspect of the project we wanted to change; however, our work was not in vain. Someone has to develop games for the kids; it was just frustrating that our group was limited to that function of the organization. We know we still did valuable work for LSS, but it just would have felt better to us if we had had the opportunity to interact with the children, gotten to form personal relationships with them, and seen what was working and what improvements we needed to make in person. Even though we were not at all permitted to have personal contact with the kids, we received positive feedback from our supervisor throughout the project, so we know we did a good job.

This project had primarily positive side-effects. We helped provide the children with an empowering setting that allowed them to develop the skills needed to thrive as future citizens. In particular, our supervisor reported an improvement in communication, interpersonal skills, school performance, and respect for personal boundaries. Additionally, this project also gave the staff at Lutheran Social Services the time to focus on other needs of their organization because we took care of the leisure skill activities. Lastly, this project generated positive side-effects that may not be immediately obvious or amenable to direct observation. It was beneficial for us, the service learning students, in that it provided us with new insight on diverse cultures within our community. As a result of this project, we are equipped with a better understanding of and empathy for those with mental disability, both in our future jobs within the field of psychology and more broadly in life in general.

Moreover, the kids of LSS got lessons they will take home with them from the new and exciting games we provided for them. We may not be able to visually see our impact on the children, but because of the positive feedback from our supervisor, we have good reason to believe these kids profited from the leisure activities, and that was our ultimate goal.

As alluded to earlier, this project arguably will have a long-term impact. Primary and secondary preventive intervention are clearly demonstrated in this project: our work will reduce the overall cost that would have been incurred if no intervention was done at all. Furthermore, the kids acquired skills developed through the games to help them live more conventional lives. Lastly, the LSS program will have the games we created available for future use. They can employ them for years to come, yielding positive effects for kids served by the organization for years to come. As previously mentioned, it was frustrating not to be permitted any real contact

with the children, but we know our work is highly valued and important because of the lasting impact we had on the organization.

Discussion:

Through working at this site, we had the chance to learn about the population we served. All of the kids love to learn, be active, and have fun. When provided with a concrete set of rules and guidelines, they are very pleasant, receptive, and display good listening skills. That is not to say they were perfect in every respect; there were times when they needed some extra assistance to stay calm or follow the rules of the activity, but for the most part, they did a commendable job of being open to any activity and agreeing to do it correctly, so as to take everything they can out of it.

Moreover, we were better able understand the cultural context. In contrast to much of our everyday lives, time at LSS is very structured and organized in everything they do. We can take our new cultural understanding of the population with us as we further our education in the discipline and enter into our future jobs within and outside of the field of psychology. It is important to have a background that includes knowledge and experience regarding at-risk populations when going into the field of psychology. However, even if future employment does not involve the field, it is valuable to have knowledge and experience in this aspect of life. Throughout our lives and careers, we will rub shoulders with people from all walks of life. To function effectively as civic-minded individuals, it is vitally important that we develop a deeper understanding of and tolerance for people who may be marginalized or misunderstood.

If we had the chance to do the project again, there is one major thing we would do differently: we would take the time to get our background checks done and become certified to interact with the kids. If that piece had been taken care of, we could have set times to go to the

site and actually implement our activities and complete other types of work with the goal of making a difference in the children's lives. We felt that there was a real divide between ourselves and the kids. We had only a handful of opportunities to go to the actual site, and even when we were allowed on-site, we were not able to have any real interaction with the children because we were not certified to do so. Also, we would develop a set schedule with our service learning group, with the intent to develop better communication. There were periods when it felt difficult to find times to meet, which caused some degree of frustration. We believe better communication and set meeting times would alleviate some of that frustration and afford us more time to focus on the project and develop better activities for the children.

If we had the opportunity to continue to work at LSS, we would raise funds to obtain more equipment for the kids. Through developing games, we ran into some difficulty because LSS simply does not have the necessary equipment for certain games. More and improved equipment would open up the possibility of implementing more and improved activities for the kids. In addition, we would establish interventions that focus not only on interpersonal skills, but on more technical skills like reading. Part of that is the fact that we did not have the proper background checks and certification to interact with the kids, so we were unable to read with them.

Our supervisor set the aforementioned four goals that we were to center our games around. Had we been permanent employees of the site, we would have made a few additional categories for the games, for example, reading skills. It would also have been more productive if we had had the chance to lead the games ourselves. We were limited to writing down how we wanted the activities to be led. Because of that limitation, the staff who led the activities may not have fully understood what we hoped to be learned from the game. We believe that if we had led

the games ourselves, we could have done a slightly better job assuring the appropriate learning objectives were focused on, as well as making sure the rules were followed and the game was played correctly.

Lutheran Social Services (LSS) integrates many of the community psychology concepts that were covered in our class throughout the organization's diverse interventions. One concept in particular is the incorporation of early childhood experiences through primary and secondary preventive measures. Specifically, their afterschool program targets at-risk children, or those at an increased risk for developing mental disorders (i.e., lower socioeconomic status). They then implement interventions with the goal of reducing the incidence of psychological disorders. By enrolling in an LSS community program and identifying this problem early, it was determined that such preventative interventions indicated better educational outcomes, lower social deviance, greater social participation, better cognitive development, less involvement in crime, and better social-emotional development (Moritsugu, Vera, Wong & Duffy, 2014). With those benefits, the children are enabled to develop interpersonal, communicative, and intellectual skills and to live "normal" lives. That will decrease the likelihood of institutionalization down the road and will ultimately conserve community resources.

Another area of importance that is implemented throughout LSS is the idea of empowerment. More specifically, the afterschool program provided psychological empowerment which included elements of empowering settings through the activities they had the group participate in (Moritsugu, Vera, Wong & Duffy, 2014). One key idea related to psychological empowerment is critical awareness, which was assessed through the post-activity discussions that occurred after every leisure activity. The children were asked questions that revolved heavily around the skill theme of a particular game (e.g., following instructions). Many of which gave

them awareness to that theme, which allowed them to grow in those skill areas. Along with this notion of awareness, another aspect of psychological empowerment that was implemented in the afterschool program was the concept of encouraging personal participatory efficacy and building relational connections. As alluded to earlier, the children developed social support, a key element in teamwork and collaboration; furthermore, being able to relate with others is a critical skill to learn at a young age, and with it, the children made those individuals more skilled in social interaction.

The notion of encouraging personal participant efficacy leads to the idea that the children perceived that their participation had made a difference. LSS also fostered an empowering setting through its leisure activities by giving the participants power to help in group decisions and actions (Moritsugu, Vera, Wong & Duffy, 2014). By incorporating those elements, each child felt like what he or she was doing mattered. That helped the kids further develop interpersonal skills, which led them to become more active and interpersonal people.

Another concept that Lutheran Social Services integrates into their interventions is the notion of developing social support. Even more specifically, an element of social support that manifests through LSS afterschool activities is the idea of social integration. The participating students establish the feeling that they are a part of a group, experience acceptance, and achieve a sense of belonging and being wanted (Moritsugu, Vera, Wong & Duffy, 2014). Because of that social support, they may feel better and more confident that they have adequate resources to deal with their demands. Further, it can be empowering to experience social support or acquire the necessary resources to deal with demands.

An additional element of social support addressed in the LSS afterschool program is the institution of emotional support and the friendships created because of it. It was observed that the children in the program joked together, laughed together, provided constructive feedback, and offered affirmation; all in all, they acted in ways that made their teammates and friends feel better (Moritsugu, Vera, Wong & Duffy, 2014). Those feelings are reciprocated, and children are able to work better as a team because of that aspect. Moreover, these gains then introduce another element of social support: the idea of specific support. In many of the activities, there was a focus on team building; the students had to work together in order to accomplish a predetermined goal. Encouraging teammates helped them build confidence and enhanced the group's ability to solve problems. The whole idea of incorporating social support into an intervention like this is to reduce stressors, and in conjunction with primary and secondary preventive interventions, the less stress the students experience, the fewer complications they will likely have in life.

References

Moritsugu, J., Vera, E., Wong, F. Y., & Duffy, K. G. (2014). *Community psychology* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.