

Exploring Pre-Program Students' Experiences in a Community-Based Literacy Program with K-5 Latino Students

Abstract

This work explores effort to engage university students in a community-based literacy after school program in improving the communication skills of first-generation Latino elementary school children. Five pre-education program students en route to the education program collaborated with three teacher educators twice a week in providing small group reading instruction within the students' mobile home community. Using ethnographic methods including interviews and reflections, we were able to garner perspectives on the nature of supporting students' literacy skills in the community. Preliminary findings suggest pre-program students engaged in a community literacy program shaped by a *community-based model* working collaboratively with teacher educators are able to develop a basic understanding of pedagogy and skill sets necessary for supporting K-5 students' literacy skills.

1. Purpose

Continuing with the institutional and faculty efforts to build and continue connections with the community as well as provide necessary experiences for future teachers, the authors of this research collaborated with pre-program university students to implement literacy activities with K-5 Latino students in an after-school program. Previous research shows that community service learning is crucial as it offers university students, looking to pursue a career in education, valuable positive experiences that directly impact their teacher identity (Donninson & Itter, 2010). Similar to Vickers, Harris and McCarthy's conceptions (2004), we recognize the necessity of fostering the development of reflection in pre-service teachers. The process of reflection links university students' community service experiences with the curriculum content and gives them the impetus to search for tools and practices to implement, while they participate in community programs. The purpose of this work is to localize the university students' incipient ideas after their participation in an after-school community-based literacy program. Our overarching guiding question was, what were the university pre-program students' perceptions of teaching while working with K-5 Latino students in a community-based literacy program? Secondary questions included, What type of problems did the pre-program students face while working with the Latino students in this community-based literacy program? What type of resources did they use to solve those problems? How did the university students connect their university course content to their participation in the community program?

2. Theoretical framework

This paper uses the *community-based learning model* as it relates to experiential learning and facilitates community engagement. Community engagement should be meaningful, meet the needs of the community members, as well as promote student learning (Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement, 2015). There are four models of community engagement, viz., direct service, indirect service, advocacy and research. Direct service includes face-to-face interactions with members of the community. Indirect service is void of direct interaction and involves more behind the scenes activities such as fundraising or establishing a website for an organization. Advocacy pertains to engagement in activities that raise awareness for a cause. Research relates to the process of gathering information about a cause. One of the main goals of the second semester of the community-based literacy program was to have the university students actively engage in the community by directly serving K-5 students within that community. Thus, it was critical to adopt the direct service approach to community engagement.

In addition, we used an ethnographic approach as it is proven to be an effective research model to study cultural processes of everyday lives (Yanik, 2017). Essentially, we used the ethnographic approach to comprehend the perspective of the pre-program students who were using and reflecting on their experiences in the community-based literacy program with the goal to guide the university faculty to make explicit connections between theories and students' experiences in the community.

3. Methods and Data Sources

Participants

A total of 5 pre-program students participated in the community-based literacy program. Data were gathered from three university students who were in their sophomore year and who attended the program once a week for three months during the 2018 fall semester.

Instrument

Primary respondents were interviewed using a structured interview protocol specifically designed for this program. The protocol included 11 open-ended questions that targeted the pre-program students' ideas and experiences in this community-based literacy program (e.g., goals as students, beliefs about culture, experiences and collaboration with other teachers).

Data Analysis

Data for this research was gathered using a process of pattern coding to look for themes, patterns, and codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to elucidate a meaningful description of the students' ideas and their experiences in the program. We double-coded the data for reliability purposes.

4. Results

Preliminary results show that pre-program students participating in a community literacy program that reflects the community-based learning model, developed a basic understanding of pedagogy required to support the development of K-5 students' literacy skills. Working collaboratively with teacher educators provided the pedagogical foundation upon which pre-program students could explore and form their own pedagogical skills and literacy understandings. Collaboration between teacher educators and pre-program students fostered a symbiotic relationship of professional growth and development. This supports what Zlotkowski, Longo, & Williams (2007) reported in their study about faculty working with and viewing their university students as partners in the community. However, these preliminary findings indicate that these primary participants were looking for ways to improve their teaching skills to enhance their students' communication skills in English, like Samuel who shared that, "They need more support than just in the classroom. I need to seek ways to find to get that support outside of the classroom to supplement their learning." Stephanie also added that, "One thing I took away from working at the Clinic was actually working with the students one-on-one. I learned how to maneuver them to focus on the lesson while incorporating their interests, so it becomes entertaining for them." This indicates that we, as faculty, should establish venues for communication and discussion to identify opportunities for pre-program students to learn about tools and practices that they can implement in the community under university faculty supervision. Samuel's quote also serves as an indicator for our teacher preparation program and its faculty to teach about culturally relevant pedagogies and provide community-based experiences in which university students learn about other cultures/languages and use these understandings as teaching/learning tools.

5. Educational Significance

This research is especially important on two different levels. At the individual level, for the pre-program students, the community-based experiences provided pre-program students with rich

opportunities to learn about other cultures, develop pedagogical skills, experience community engagement and explore the formation of their teacher identities before attaining acceptance into education programs. Moreover, it also motivated pre-program students to look for teaching tools and strategies that they could use to better serve their K-5 students.

At the institutional level, the community-based program was key to the university as this community-university partnership was recently developed and needed to be cultivated. This partnership also supported underserved K-5 student population in the region by emphasizing the development of students' literacy skills. This community-based program nurtured the collaboration between university faculty and students and emphasized the theory-practice continuum as it connected the course content with community-based experiences which, in turn, further fostered the university venues of collaboration within the community.

To this end, experiences in a literacy-based community program can offer valuable insight to faculty as well as the pre-service students about teaching and learning in the community.

6. References

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