Chapter 19

The Transformative Nature of Community Engagement in the Arts

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ABSTRACT

Art educators have engaged in various community-engagement experiences with undergraduate classes for many years. In addition to the curricular reward, the authors have found that students are experiencing community in new ways through these opportunities. In this study, researchers used a mixed methods approach to carefully examine several key aspects of community work in afterschool programs in two community centers. First, the context was explored, and ethnography was used to describe experiences with art, community, and engagement in an area facing severe socioeconomic challenges. Outcome data from one site helped to link community work to at-risk student achievement on end of grade testing. Outcome data from the second research site suggests that resilience increased in students engaged in afterschool programming, perhaps through the incorporation of visual art. Last, university students’ response papers were content analyzed to illustrate gains achieved through these opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

When university students work with children in local community sites everyone becomes more engaged in the process of learning (Bruner, 1960; Dewey, 1934). Social justice is also addressed when college and university students move beyond the comfort of their post-secondary institutions, use culturally
responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), and are able to debunk prior stereotypes of how children learn. These sites could be characterized as alternative learning venues for university students, found in locations where students have been historically underserved (Anderson, Gussak, Hallmark & Allison, 2010).

Art educators in our university’s department have hosted local schoolchildren on our campus through after-school art classes for several decades. As a practicum experience for our university students, these after-school classes have filled a community need for art programming directed toward youth while serving the pre-service teachers’ need to gain hands-on experience working with school-aged children. We recognized these dual needs were much broader than we had expected, as our after-school classes were populated primarily with homeschooled children and the children of university faculty and staff. Therefore, our university students were not getting the most accurate picture of the spectrum of children they would be working with in their future jobs as public school art teachers. Clearly, there was a gap that we needed to fill that could best be identified by re-engaging with the community our university was designed to serve.

This chapter describes some results of our engagement with two community centers designed to meet the needs of youth in our city. Our work has continued in several iterations with community partners in addition to those described in this chapter, as well. The university students who participate in these programs are well-served as they are provided with a more comprehensive view of the nature of the young learner. The young learners are provided with opportunities to explore the arts in ways that they are often unable to do in their schools. As we work to prepare pre-service teachers, we are encouraged by the findings from this study as they propel us to continue engaging with our community partners in providing lifelong academic and pro-social benefits for all of our students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concepts of community engagement and service-learning are integral to the programming described in this chapter, which was a result of our partnership with two community centers in our city. Art educators have successfully engaged their students in service-learning endeavors for both the betterment of their communities and the instruction of their students (Russell & Hutzel, 2007; Taylor, 2002). Taylor and Ballengee-Morris (2004) describe these dual aims of service-learning as mutually beneficial, communally agreed, and collaboratively completed. The effectiveness of any service-learning endeavor is equally dependent on the quality of the services being rendered and the learning that is taking place.

Similarly, the concept of community engagement is defined by the Carnegie Foundation (n.d.) as “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (“Classification Description”, para. 3). Others (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008) describe this concept as a “two-way street”, emphasizing the collaborative model wherein the community partner is an equal player in creating and sharing knowledge. We believed that the kind of knowledge generated by our community partners would be crucial in helping our university students develop greater sensitivity to the populations we would serve with them. Engaging with our community partners in this model would provide our undergraduate students with opportunities to use culturally responsive teaching approaches in alternative learning venues.

Our community partners were interested in determining if youth who participated in these community-based art-inclusive afterschool programs would see any benefit academically, as has been documented in