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Service Learning Experience

Throughout my time working with the children at Ord Terrace Elementary School, I believe that I have learned not only how to be a better teacher, but also how to be a better person. With the Service Learning Outcomes, I believe they apply both to us and our students. They are values that we need to teach the students, and learn ourselves. With the first outcome, I feel Rachel Naomi Remen expresses it best: “we cannot serve from a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected, that we are willing to touch” and be willing to be touched by in return. We need to understand the community and the people we are trying to help. At the same time, we need to let them understand us. Our responsibility is to connect and serve the community. Serving means to put the other person above yourself. If everyone does this, then everyone becomes equal.

By working with the kids in our class, I have realized that I come from a place of privilege, not economically, but in amount of experience. I have come to have had many experiences and chances to learn other cultures and languages, and I had to learn to change how I approach topics and the children to better help them understand what we were trying to share. This has made me reflect on my own place in the community and how I perceived myself and others with preconceived notions and expectations of what they are thinking. I realized I had grown to expect a certain unfair amount of knowledge of culture, and it made me evaluate my current mindset.

Through the activities we have tried to express to them the importance of accepting differences in other cultures, as well as try to alleviate stereotypes they may have had. At the beginning they had many preconceptions of Japan, often mixing it with China. They seem to have at the very least lessened some of those misunderstandings. Through our classes we stressed the importance of understanding your own culture, as

well as the importance of learning about others, and that everyone is different, but equal.

With the second outcome, by having a good sense of who oneself is, and where you fit into the overall group, this can learn to making connection to the overall community and society. It's somewhat of a chain reaction. By taking care of personal well-being, mentally and physically, you are better equipped to help the group. When groups have good well-being, it allows for the community as a whole to be healthy, and the society as a whole follows. My personal and professional actions, in terms of teaching these students, affect the society short term by helping them remove stereotypes and misconceptions of the individual children, and help them develop an understanding and acceptance of different cultures.

In the long term, these children will grow and hopefully expand on these ideals, teaching them to others and future generations. This will allow in the long run for society to grow more accepting and culturally aware. Personally, from teaching these children in a professional setting I have developed an understanding that I have the social responsibility to help these students learn that differences in cultures is not a bad thing, and to help them learn to be more aware, understanding, and accepting of others different than themselves.

With the third outcome, it especially applies to us. Our job is to help equalize the students' circumstances and provide them with resources they need to learn a second language. This in turn will help them face other struggles in understanding others and themselves. One of the main issues facing foreign language education is that "Critical issues such as racism and other injustices may not be addressed sufficiently in foreign language classrooms". Hopefully, by teaching these students about the culture of Japan instead of only the language, we can help them see their own stereotypes. And, then they may be able to understand how others view them.

Within the community we are working with in our Service Learning, the overall demographic is very heavily based in the Mexican culture, and many of the students speak or at least understand Spanish. This creates an interesting dynamic for us as

their teachers of a foreign language, as we are not only introducing them to a new language and culture, but also bringing forward the fact they they are born of two separate cultures themselves. This can be very helpful in increasing global competency and awareness. However, there is definitely a disparity in the resources allowed to these students, many of which come from lower income families. For many of them, this is the only foreign language and culture education they have received in a formal setting. This does unfortunately perpetuate an inequality in the resources available to these students, especially as we only have a select group of children every week.

Overall CPY is there to help children stay off the streets and gain the skills to help them improve their situation and improve their place in society. Our job is to bring a global aspect to these students and help them grow in cultural awareness and acceptance, allowing them to further break away from the limitations they are placed under. In and of itself, second language learning is a way to lessen that gap between students and better opportunities. "Opportunities to learn about other languages and cultures are severely lacking in many low- income, minority, and urban school districts. Foreign language instruction is offered in only one-quarter of urban public schools compared with about two-thirds of suburban private schools". On top of this, even the schools that do offer it don't provide enough time and quantity to actually acquire a proficient level of communication. Thus, our job as service learners is to teach them what little we can, and provide that basis for them to one day try to learn more.

For the fourth and final outcome, this is the hardest to fulfill in such a short amount of time, but one of the most important. We need to learn how to understand and work with different cultures, and use that knowledge to service a community without trying to change the community's values. We need to develop life practices and ideals that will allow us to work with any community and provide what they need. This includes creating a space where children can happily learn and become open-minded people, so the community can grow and be better in the future.

For me it has proven to be very interesting learning to work with these children in not two, but three separate cultures. We share an American culture, but just as I have

been attempting to help them learn about Japanese culture, they in turn have been helping me learn their secondary Mexican culture, something I cannot say I've had much experience with prior. By working through our knowledge of these separate cultures, it helps us bring the cultures together and reach an greater understanding of them all. As service learners, we need to work and communicate within the context of our students' culture and experiences to better connect with them. By teaching these classes, we are not only teaching them about Japanese culture, but learning about their culture in return.

By using both cultures we can learn about each other. And, it helps increase understanding and acceptance of other cultures. During classes we have the strategy to use our own culture and the student's culture to understand a third culture. We also have a policy of letting anyone who wants to join come to class. This helps more people view different cultures equally.

Overall through my experiences with service learning, I have learned a lot about my community and how I view it. I've also experienced how my community views me. I will take the lessons I've learned about connecting cultures with me as I graduate college and start working in the world. I hope one day when I am teaching English in Japan I can use these lessons to connect with my students and help them understand other cultures as well.