

Mississippi Service Learning

Date of Experience: January 2011

Description of Experience:

I had the opportunity to volunteer and acquire service-learning hours in Jonestown, Mississippi for my Ethnic and Gender studies course in January of 2011. During this experience I was able to work for a week at the local elementary school and assist the students and the teachers in a 6th grade and 1st grade classroom. I worked with extremely diverse learners in a town that is predominantly African American, which allowed me to adapt my teaching style and it altered my thought process for certain lessons and ideas in the classroom.

Wisconsin Teacher Standard Alignment:

This artifact aligns with Standard 3: *Teachers understand that children learn differently. The teacher understands how pupils differ in their approaches to learning and the barriers that impede learning and can adapt instruction to meet the diverse needs of pupils, including those with disabilities and exceptionalities.*

The main focus for this standard alignment is *barriers that impede learning*. The students that I worked with during this particular experience are from the documented, poorest town in the United States. Residents in this town whose income fell below the poverty level were 70% as of 2009 according to citydata.com research. The obvious academic barriers that these students face include lack of computer access at home, no community resources such as a library outside of the school and a school curriculum that is solely focused on preparation for standardized testing. The school also still enforces corporal punishment, which I personally believe has a huge impact on the learning that goes on within the school. However, the barriers that the children in this town face are beyond academic. Their learning barriers, disabilities and exceptionalities are in most cases the cause of a long, poverty stricken history. In this case, the students in my classrooms came from families who had been born and raised in Jonestown, Mississippi and the surrounding areas their entire lives. Many of the children in my classes had ancestors who were slaves and grandparents who were house maids and field workers. The barrier's these children face currently are a continuing result of the lack of education and educational funding that their families faced. It may also be a cause of a "glass ceiling" attitude within both the students and their families. They do not see opportunities to improve themselves or their current lives in their area, therefore become victims of circumstance and repeat the cycle of their ancestors. Adaption in my instructional methods, teaching style and overall outlook on life had to be made in order to accommodate the students in these classrooms. I dealt with many different kinds of learners in this environment, some who had a positive outlook on learning and were at the level they needed to be, but most had a negative attitude for many different reasons and were at least 4 grade levels behind where they needed to be academically. For this situation I started in the middle, using review and questioning to catch students up who may have been behind and to engage students

who were on the right track. I also used PALS (Peer Assisted Learning) to let the students work together to complete an assignment and allow for the higher level learners to practice what they know in assisting the lower level learners. This not only helped me, but they helped themselves. Some instructions had to be adapted if I realized that the students were not catching on to a concept. In this case I used Smartboard applications, such as a story map to get the students involved and engaged so that we were on the right track and participating, which seemed to be one of the greatest struggles each day. I allowed the higher level learners to work ahead and give examples on the Smartboard. There was a sticker reward system that was used for positive behavior and I used that to reward good study habits. It is easy to become overwhelmed in this situation, but by remaining flexible and understanding you can make adjustments to your lesson to better serve the different learners in your classroom.

This artifact further aligns with:

Standard 2- Teachers know how children grow.

Standard 10- Teachers are connected with other teachers and the community.

UW-Platteville School of Education Knowledge, Skill, Disposition Statement Alignment:

This artifact aligns with KSD1.b. Demonstrates Knowledge of Students. The candidate displays knowledge of the typical developmental characteristics, learning styles, skills, interests, developmental backgrounds, and cultural heritages of students and is always aware of the broad ranges and variety present for each of these student characteristics and lifestyle.

This alignment is accurate because I worked closely with not only the students at this school, but the families in this community on a service learning project. Through the work that I did I was able to develop an understanding for the lifestyle and culture of the families in Jonestown, Mississippi. Through student interaction I was able to grasp and understand the particular learning styles and interests of the students in my classroom through questioning and using resources such as faculty members and the other service learning people in my group. We were able to discuss and share particular events that happened in our classroom each day and discuss how we would have handled them had it been our own classroom.

Secondary Alignment:

KSD2.a Creates and Environment of Respect and Rapport. The candidate demonstrates genuine care and respect for one another as individuals and as students, and are aware of cultural, social and intellectual and physical variations among their peers.

Personal Reflection:

What I learned about teaching/learning from this experience

I learned possibly one of my greatest lessons thus far as a prospective educator and that is students are extremely diverse learners for a multitude of reasons, but in order to educate them and understand their learning styles, you must have an understanding of their background and the communities that they live in. Had I not done community projects such as working on local houses outside of teaching each day at the school I would have had no idea where my students came from. I would have struggled to understand certain behavioral challenges and learning struggles that my students faced. This would have made creating lessons extremely difficult and frustrating. Because I had worked within the community and had background knowledge of the families that lived there, I was able to relate to my students and address the different learners in my classroom to achieve success. I was also able to develop a relationship with my students because I knew their interests and could relate to them on those particular topics. For example, many of the other teachers in my group were intimidated by the students in their classroom because not only were we the minority, but they were not sure how they could relate to them. I overheard students talking about Lil' Wayne at lunch and being a fan of rap and pop culture I was able to participate in the conversation and relate to the students. I learned that if you are an active member in the community it is easier to develop a relationship with your students and create lessons that they can relate to.

What I learned about myself as a prospective educator from this experience

As a future educator, this experience taught me how important it is to create a barrier between who I am as a person and who I am as a teacher. There are going to be things that I may not always agree with in the school where I teach or the parenting techniques being used on the students that I teach, but at the end of the day I am only a teacher. I learned that the one thing I can do is my job. My job is to create an environment that facilitates learning for each of my students, regardless of their backgrounds, disabilities and exceptionalities. My job is to develop lessons that follow a set curriculum. These lessons should address a wide range of learning styles and abilities so that I am able to test students for progress and evaluate them based on that progress. Finally, I learned the importance of background knowledge of students and their social settings. This plays a huge role in the lessons that I develop, the classroom environment that I create, and my relationship with both the students and their parents.