

Wartburg College Leadership Certification Program

Difference/Diversity Requirement

- **Gates Park Optimist Club Reflection Paper**
- **Tutoring Journal**

Difference and Diversity Requirement Gates Park Optimist Club Volunteer

Introduction

I served as a volunteer for the Gates Park Optimist Club during the second semester of the 1999-2000 school year. The Gates Park Optimist Club is an organization that works to better primarily the minority sections of the Waterloo community. One of the programs that the club fosters is a tutoring program that they hold twice a week on Mondays and Tuesdays throughout the school year. The group works with children in grades one through eight who need assistance in reading, spelling, vocabulary, and math. Most of the children that the program works with are at least one grade level behind their peers in one or more of these subjects. The club sponsors this program with the objective to lower the dropout/failure rate of minority children in the Waterloo school system.

I traveled to the tutoring site at Roosevelt Elementary School in Waterloo, IA, nearly every Tuesday afternoon from January through April. Depending on the day, there could be as many as forty-six children at the tutoring site, and I had the opportunity to work with most of these students at one point or another. This experience immersed me for the first time in a setting where I as a Caucasian was the minority. It was an amazing opportunity to learn about myself and about what being a minority is like.

During this experience I not only learned about racial diversity, but also about other differences. Most of the children that I tutored have some sort of learning or behavioral problem. Some were dyslexic, couldn't add, had Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and so on. At first, I thought that these differences were really problems, but I grew to understand that they were just challenges. They were part of the child, and one can't hold that against the child. One just has to accept the differences and embrace them as characteristics that make the child who he/she is.

Diversity Reflection

On the first day I knew that this was going to be an experience like no other. The

following is a portion of the journal I kept of the experience:

"I noticed that most of the children were staring at me. I felt a little uncomfortable. I then realized that I was the only white person in the room. I had never been in this situation before, and I felt like running. Instead, I took a deep breath and took note of a little girl flipping through a book. Readell (the founder of the program) asked her if she wanted to read it. She said, "Yes." He then told her to ask me to read it with her."

I made a decision in that split second. I knew that the easy thing to do was to leave and not come back. But, that wasn't the right decision for me. I grew up in small towns that had no diversity, and most everyone was racist even though they had never even met another person different from themselves. I didn't want to be one of those people. In order to grow as an individual you must be willing to step outside of your comfort zone and experience new things. These children needed

me, and that is what I saw at that moment. I truly believe that working with these children has made me a better person. I have learned so much from each of them even though I was the tutor that was to be teaching them.

They taught me acceptance. Working with children with different learning styles and disabilities, behavioral problems, and ethnic backgrounds who are each amazing little *people* has reinforced in me the fact that differences in people are qualities, not downfalls. Although some of the aspects such as learning disabilities and behavioral problems carry negative connotations, they are still characteristics of these wonderful children. Each of us brings something new to the table, and those differences are assets to the greater community. Without differences, we would be communities of perfect paper cutouts, and that would be a very sad thing. Accepting different people for who they are is, on the other hand, a wonderful thing.

They taught me patience. Take for example my work with a boy named Joey who has ADD. At first, it was very frustrating working with him because he would only want to play or give me reasons why he didn't need me. With patience and critical inquiry I was able to be successful with him, and I helped him learn. It took time and a lot of thinking outside the box to find learning activities to keep him interested, but the end result was worth the hard work.

They taught me leadership. Wartburg College defines leadership as taking responsibility of a community and making it better through public action. In this case I took responsibility for a community of elementary children in Waterloo. There was an evident need for someone to take responsibility because these children were so far below their grade levels in different academic areas. I then took action by taking the time once (sometimes twice) a week to drive to Waterloo and work with the children. By practicing leadership as Wartburg College defines it, I also learned about myself as a leader. After getting to know me, the children looked up to me, trusted me, and let me help them. I committed myself to this community because I knew that I could help them as a leader in the classroom.

They taught me critical inquiry skills. Since the children were usually far below their grade level or had learning disabilities, working on one subject for an extended amount of time was very difficult. Take a math problem for example. We would try doing the problem as the teacher tells the student in class to do it. When the student begins to get discouraged because s/he still doesn't get the right answer, we must try another way to figure the problem. I then have to imagine a new way to do it such as drawing a picture of putting it into a word problem depending on the student. We then explore the different, creative ways to figure math problems through trial and error. This component of critical inquiry was

visited on a regular basis when I was working with the students. The ability to think outside the box was a very valuable tool in my service experience.

Conclusion

When I decided to become involved with the Leadership Certification Program, I was stumped as to how I could satisfy the difference/diversity requirement of the program. Going off campus for an extended amount of time was not financially possible for me, so May Term and service trips were not options for me. While I was taking ID315: Leadership Theories and Practices I was required to do a community service volunteer project to complete the course. I became involved with the Gates Park Optimist Club at that point in time because they were looking for volunteer tutors. Little did I know that I was about to embark on one of the most influential learning experiences related to difference and diversity. I never thought that I could be involved in such a diverse community this close to home, but I was soon proven wrong.

As my reflection stated, this service experience was truly a learning experience. I learned about acceptance, patience, leadership, and critical inquiry. Although my learning experience does not stop there, those are the most valuable lessons I will take from my journey as a volunteer in this diverse community. I can only hope that the lessons I gave the children were just as valuable.