ENGAGE

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
RESEARCH AND PRACTICE ON
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Contents

Volume 2, Number 1

Teaching Through a Latin American Medical Mission Trip

Stephanie C. Davis and Elizabeth A. Hinz

Jenny Leonard, MS, AGNP (center) and Paul Johnson, Logistics Expert, (in doorway) facilitate clinic day as locals wait their turn for medical attention.

During a recent Spring break, Dr. Stephanie Davis, Graduate Coordinator and Associate Professor in the School of Nursing at Clemson University; and Elizabeth Hinz, lecturer in the School of Nursing at Clemson University, co-led a medical mission trip to a Latin American country. Dr. Davis has been involved in eight previous trips to Ecuador, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic. Mrs. Hinz has participated in three previous trips to the Dominican Republic. The trips include both undergraduate and graduate level nursing students who are preparing to become either registered nurses or nurse practitioners at the completion of their specific Clemson University nursing program. In 2015, James Smith, PhD, Construction Management Sciences, joined the team and now takes construction sciences students to work on construction of a new hospital and mission house in San Juan de la Maguana. Under the leadership of the other co-team leader, Keith Scott, MD, the team is able to include additional team members to support our mission. These members are often former students (graduates) who return for the trip to continue to support the people of the Dominican Republic and their extended Clemson family.

The medical mission trip is managed through Volunteers in Medical Missions (VIMM. org) and the team works closely with the staff of Solid Rock International (http://www. solidrockinternational.org/) while staying in their mission guest house.

Medical Team Interaction With Children

The medical team provides healthcare in remote underserved locations. The team often makes time to interact with local youth through play activities while family, friends, and youth wait for care. Many of these children have never seen a Frisbee, bubble makers, or other toys commonly used in the United States. Time spent with the children helps display the love and care that the team brings to the community and helps reinforce that each person's life is valuable regardless of economic status.

Typical Home

In the rural areas of the Dominican Republic, houses are made of plywood and old tarps with an open floor plan. There are often just holes cut for doorways and windows with no coverings to keep out the malaria-carrying mosquitos, animals, and the elements. Livestock often roam freely with few boundaries between indoors and outdoors. Animal feces and urine frequently contaminate water that is used for bathing and swimming and is often used to irrigate crops.

Pit Toilets

In Latin America, 44% of the population still use pit toilets. In the rural areas of Latin America, only 31.4% of the population has water piped into their homes, and only 36.4% have access to potable water in their neighborhoods. For the urban areas, the numbers do not increase as much as one would expect with 58.7% and 35% respectively (Population Reference Bureau: http://www.prb.org/pdf09/64.2urbanization.pdf). The pit toilets are often located in the center

of common areas or close to the fields. The pit toilets are covered with rusted corrugated tin that serves as the walls. The tin allows little airflow through the outhouse and creates a hot

and moist host environment ideal for bacterial growth. Typically, there are no amenities such as tissue paper, hand sanitizer, or soap. The few available toilets found are not attached to water sources, and flushing is done through a gravity system using buckets of standing water.

Clinic Day

Medical clinics are often held in community school rooms. The school typically closes for the day to allow the medical team access to the space since most of the schools consist of one or two rooms. Community members often unite to bring food to the team while they and their families go without. Some community members provide food to honor the team while others do it because they do not feel worthy of the few bounties they have been provided. Many of these families live on less than $1.25/day (www.dosomething.org/facts/11-facts-about-global-poverty) and many of them exist on no income at all. They provide for their families using what they can grow in their yards. Many walk miles to obtain potable water. Not everyone can be seen by the medical team due to limited time and resources. Therefore, the team tries to triage the youngest, eldest, and those who appear the most ill.

Centro Cristiano de Educacion Para el Desarrollo

This school was founded by American and Canadian missionaries, thus the U.S., Canadian, and Dominican flags. The school houses about 1,200 students from pre-K through 12th grade. Due to limited resources, students only attend half-day classes. Thus, half the students attend in the morning; the other half attend after lunch. The large majority of the students, approximately 50%, are sponsored for their education because their families are unable to pay for uniforms and books that must be provided before students are allowed to attend. A flag-raising ceremony with national anthems and words of prayer start each student's day of learning.

Afternoon Chores

After school, the children often go home to hard labor and long work hours. These children came down the road with their cattle as the medical team was viewing the site for a new hospital and mission house. The children were moving the cattle from one field to another due to the limited water sources and lack of vegetation for grazing. There is no money to purchase feed for the animals so the cattle must survive from what they are able to graze on in the fields. The community hopes for rain to supply life-sustaining water for the cattle; but February, March, and April are considered the dry season and the Dominican Republic gets limited rainfall during this time.

Deworming and Hygiene Education Station

In the Deworming and Hygiene Education Station, local students receive deworming medications for gastrointestinal parasites. Here, students are taught water safety and hand washing. According to the World Health Organization in 2014, inadequate drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene are estimated to cause 842,000 diarrheal disease deaths per year (www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/diseases/en/). At this station, the team also disperses thousands of bars of hotel-sized soaps, donated clothes and shoes, and sunglasses. Sunglasses are a luxury but are needed greatly in these Latin American countries. The people who live here are so close to the equator that even young adults develop visual impairments and eye conditions that could, if untreated, lead to loss of vision and even blindness.

Carolyn Schmutz, RN, Nurse Practitioner student, injects a patient's joint for pain relief, under the supervision of Keith Scott, MD, while another nursing student compassionately holds the patient's hand. This illustrates the holistic approach to providing care. The people of the Dominican Republic start hard labor at a young age, spending time working in the fields, growing their own food, and taking care of the livestock. Over the years, this hard labor takes a huge toll on their bodies. The locals often suffer from back and neck pain from repetitive motions and joint pain from standing and lifting for years on end. To provide relief of joint pain without the risk of gastrointestinal side effects produced by taking oral nonsteroidal, anti-inflammatory medications (i.e., ibuprophen and others), injections are often used to provide relief of the most severe pain, even if the relief is only temporary.

Construction Site for New Hospital and Mission House

The construction of a new hospital and mission house will help further the goal of improved health by providing additional resources and teaching opportunities. During high school, students in the community are encouraged to follow one of three tracks: communications, nursing, or teaching. By having a larger healthcare facility, all three tracks can be expanded with additional interdisciplinary learning experiences. The improved medical facilities are expected to impact the overall health of the surrounding community.

According to the World Health Organization, ensuring good overall health of the world's children is critical since many adult and older-age health problems stem from early life experiences and the living conditions endured as children (www.who.int/ageing/publications/global_health.pdf). As nursing professionals, we realize the importance of a healthy start. In bringing students to the Dominican Republic, we hope to make an impact on countless individuals, beginning with the children. By having our students teach students in the Dominican Republic, we are developing a sense of global community and support for all students. Global health for all children requires education, financial resources, and the unification of multiple developed countries to help underserved and developing countries flourish.

About the Authors

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Teaching and Learning in Panama—An Interview With Derek Owens

Derek Owens with some of the children from his village in Panama.

Teaching as a Peace Corps volunteer has traditionally been a way to engage learners while also providing the volunteer with the opportunity to becoming fully engaged in the learning and teaching process. Derek Owens is a 26-year-old Peace Corps volunteer from Bluffton, SC, who is now part of the Teaching English program in Panama. By immersing himself in the Panamanian culture, Derek has been able to explore ways to further engage both students and other teachers. His experiences in Panama offer insights into teaching English as a second language, as well as insights into the fulfilling experiences offered through the Peace Corps in Panama and in other countries. His interview below is adapted from *Hannah Goes Fishing*, a blog maintained by Hannah Harrison, a Peace Corps volunteer in Zambia. *Hannah Goes Fishing* is dedicated to exploring Peace Corps volunteers' experiences all over the world and can be accessed at https://hannahgoesfishing.wordpress.com/2015/08/12/this-peace-corps-life-panama/

In what country and program do you serve?

I am a Teaching English (TE) volunteer in Panama. At the end of our 10-week pre-service training, each TE volunteer is paired with a counterpart who is an English teacher at a/the school in the community. The three goals within our project are focused on (a) teachers, (b) students, and (c) the school community. Each volunteer goes about addressing these goals differently; through co-planning with teachers, co-teaching in the classroom, informal English practice, etc. Some volunteers give provincial-wide seminars sponsored by the ministry of education; others hold small instructional meetings with only the teachers from their school. The work of each TE volunteer is so varied that it's difficult

to give a comprehensive picture of what our project does. Also, the TE project has only been in Panama for five years, so we're consistently evaluating and improving it.

My work is specifically different than that of my coworkers. I live in a very small indigenous community. The desire to learn English that the community expresses, along with my assessment of the needs of the people, has caused me to focus my work in different areas. While I still spend lots of time as a "consultant" for my teachers, I don't work with them on a daily basis.

I am a member of a group of volunteers who live in other indigenous communities in this region called *Universidad al Campo* (UAC). UAC works with 12th-grade students to encourage them to continue studying in university, specifically focusing in sustainable agriculture. The idea and goal is that these students will return to their homes after graduating to share more sustainable farming practices that produce more food to the subsistence farmers of the area. (The majority of people slash and burn wooded areas for their farms.)

I was also recently elected to the position of Vice President for the Gender and Development (GAD) committee of Peace Corps Panama. We promote projects related to gender equality, HIV/AIDS education, and youth development. GAD has three major annual events:

1. Four youth GAD camps that teach kids to think about their future and how to avoid obstacles, specifically STIs and teen pregnancy
2. A "Women's Healthy Artisan Seminar" that teaches basic business practices and sustainable artisan crafts with a gender-specific lens, while also addressing healthy relationships
3. A "Men's Health Seminar" that introduces ways of becoming a community leader. We also discuss healthy relationships and what it means to respect your friend, family member, or partner.

Derek and other Peace Corps volunteers go all out in engaging these Panamanian students with silly antics that cross all language barriers.

What are some of the most rewarding parts of your service? What have been some of your greatest challenges? Has Peace Corps service met/surpassed/ trampled on your expectations of what service would be like?

I have had various ups and downs during my first year of service, both personally and related to my work. Some of the most rewarding parts of my service thus far have been the two projects I have now focused my time on, GAD and UAC. Empowering kids to make it through the college application process who never could have imagined attending a university is unbelievably fulfilling. Even when they don't make it through the whole process, the looks on their faces when they leave our seminars with new leadership skills and confidence are something I will never forget. The youth development workshops I have facilitated through GAD are also *so* enriching. Knowing that I am sharing information about sexual health that could change the life of these kids is an awesome feeling.

What are Panamanians like?

The town I live in is called Buenos Aires and it is within an indigenous "reservation" called the Comarca Ngäbe-Buglé and is deep in the mountains of the continental divide. Buenos Aires is the last community that buses service and is about two hours from the nearest provincial capital (large grocery stores, markets, hospital, university, etc.). There are literally dozens of communities that one can access only by walking for hours after taking a bus to my community. Buenos Aires is the largest town in the area; it has a school, medical center, small stores, and both a Catholic and an evangelical church. For this reason, all the residents of communities further into the mountains travel by foot or horseback for as many as 12 hours to run errands, attend school or church, and seek medical attention.

I explain this because the people who live *in* Buenos Aires (a population of about 350) are *very* poor, but in comparison to the people I see coming through on a daily basis (and the communities I have visited on hikes) they are much more well off. The vast majority of all these people are subsistence farmers, and cultivate nearly all the rice, corn, beans, starchy vegetables, bananas, and plantains that make up most of their diet. They also have an infinite cycle of chickens that lay eggs, raise their chicks, and then are slaughtered for meat. The women do all of the cooking, most of the time over a wood fire. Men work on the farms, which are all further into the mountains, anywhere from 15 minutes to two hours walking. Children attend school in the mornings and play soccer or baseball in the afternoons.

There are two different indigenous tribes that live in this area, Ngäbe and Buglé. Each has its own language, but where I live those languages are basically lost. If you hike a few hours north you will find communities of each group that are still very culturally strong. There are lots of artisan crafts that are made by these groups and both wear similar traditional dress. These cultures and people are very different from the Latino people that populate most of the rest of the country, and there is pretty harsh racism that exists towards the indigenous groups.

Derek's house in Panama.

What is your housing like? What amenities do you have? What amenities don't you have? What are some of the biggest challenges of your lifestyle?

My house is made of mud (this is actually NOT common in Panama, only in my region). It is two small rooms, one of which I treat as my kitchen, the other my bedroom. I spend most of my time on my small front porch in my hammock, where I have a view of the town center and soccer field. I do not have electricity, but I do have running water (which I have to filter).

How is it being a volunteer in Panama, specifically?

Each Peace Corps country is different. Panama is very small and easily traveled, and lots of my friends and fellow volunteers live in close enough proximity to visit each other for a day without much effort. My site is relatively far from where my closest volunteers live in comparison, and a lot of times this has made me feel alone or excluded. It has also been difficult living among such poor people, most of whom have access to American media or have come in contact with American tourists. This causes a very skewed view of what "most" American people are like (white, blonde, rich, promiscuous). I've been able to get over these stereotypes within my area, but when I'm in nearby cities, I can always feel what people are thinking as they stare me down.

I'm sure this isn't any different than lots of Peace Corps programs in other countries, but the life of volunteers here in Panama varies significantly from person to person. The projects working here are: Teaching English, Community Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Agriculture Systems, and Environmental Health. There are volunteers who have electricity, Internet access in their house, refrigerator and washing machine, consistent running water,

and a house large enough to have a "guest room." Other volunteers live in raised wooden shacks, have no electricity or cell phone service, cook over wood fires, and poop in buckets. Some people live in cities of 50,000 people, and others in villages of less than 150.

The difference in site placement—and of assigned country—creates a type of hierarchy among Peace Corps volunteers around the world (and encourages the coining of terms like "posh corps" and "beach corps"). Lots of people like to compare difficulty of site based on a lack of resources, but what I have concluded is that each site comes with its difficulties. While it may be tough to collect your water from a faraway river on a daily basis, it is also difficult to find where one fits in what could be considered a city. Some volunteers have a hard time convincing their communities to work with them, and others have the problem of not having enough time to dedicate themselves to everything their town wants from them. There are volunteers who feel lonely and wish they had a way to communicate with friends/family/coworkers more consistently, and people who can't seem to get the personal time they'd hoped for in Peace Corps due to constant connectivity. I am a strong advocate *against* comparisons, and *in favor of* recognition that no matter where a person is serving, we are all Peace Corps volunteers making an immeasurable positive impact across the globe.

Why did you join the Peace Corps?

I joined the Peace Corps for lots of reasons, both philanthropic and personal. I had been told many times that I would be a good Peace Corps volunteer by random acquaintances throughout my college career, and I began seriously researching it towards the end of college. I love providing a service that I truly feel is needed and that I feel fulfilled in volunteering my time for. After reading various blogs of Peace Corps volunteers and speaking with the few that I had met back in the U.S., I decided the Peace Corps was for me. Personally, I wanted to spend a long period of time fully immersed in a culture, to refine my Spanish skills, and for other reasons.

If you had to give a piece of advice to someone thinking about applying to Peace Corps or getting ready for staging, what would you say?

It is so hard to go in without expectations and even harder to keep yourself from developing them during training but don't. If you let your service unfold itself, you will be surprised at how wonderful and successful it can be. Don't lose touch with friends or family from the States, and I don't mean simply filling them in on recent and future events. Talk to them about your emotions and don't be afraid to tell them when you're having a hard time.

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Derek Owens' blog (https://danceforpeacecorps.wordpress.com/) includes much more of his teaching and other experiences in Panama and an extraordinary video of the gorgeous landscape and wonderful people of Panama.

From Computers to Competencies: Why We Canned the "Canned" Curriculum

Rachel A. Tambornino

Abstract

This article examines one high school's change in curriculum from branded computer-based programming (credit recovery) for at-risk high schoolers to a competency-based curriculum. Examples of how the changes were made, the design process, and the alignment to standards are given. The impacts on student learning, attendance, graduation rates, and increase in literacy are highlighted.

There are two types of classrooms in a school focused on youth at risk for graduation. One resembles a computer lab with students working on some type of branded computer curriculum where, to be honest, most students are on social media Web sites, watching videos, or just generally off task. The next room has a tower of laptops in the corner with a few students working silently on them, but where most students are also engaged in classroom learning—looking at primary source documents, charting land formations, or reading silently. Which classroom sees greater students' successes? Which classroom has actively engaged students? Which students want to come to school?

Competency-based education is a hot topic right now and the term is becoming overused in today's educational systems. It is used to define a vast variety of programming, ranging from online learning to vocational experience. The only consistent characteristic is that the instruction is not tied to "seat time," but rather to the comprehension and understanding of the material. The U.S. Department of Education (2011) defines competency-based education as "a structure that creates flexibility, [and] allows students to progress as they demonstrate mastery of academic content, regardless of time, place, or pace of learning."

As we began to look at literature surrounding competency-based education, we found that most of the current research is conducted at the collegiate level. While some studies have begun to look at the K-12 educational system, they are often published by organizations promoting competency-based learning. Very few research reports are available to use to examine the hard data and the impact of competency-based education, specifically for at-risk youth.

Rebecca Wolfe published a case study that laid out exactly the type of school we wanted to start. She described the school as "committed to ensuring that its formerly off-track and disconnected students not only earn a high school diploma, but that they graduate ready to succeed in postsecondary education" (2012, p. 2). This report became our foundational go-to piece when questions arose.

Mauston High School, located in south-central Wisconsin, USA, decided to look at its current programming and make some changes. For over 10 years, we had used various "canned" curriculum computer programs—programs that were focused on at-risk students and that promoted rigorous material and credit recovery applications. Yet students were not finding success with these programs. Students were disengaged with the programs and

school itself in general since classes were on the computer with little staff or student interaction. The graduation rate was stagnant. Something needed to be done, not only to help our youth graduate, but also to reengage them in school.

How could a small rural school reach out to its at-risk population and reverse the culture that had been created? The answer was found in a competency-based curriculum. In the spring of 2012, a needs assessment was completed to find out what qualities a new alternative curriculum should have. High school and district staff gave their input with the resounding conclusion of rigor and alignment to standards. With those two qualities acting as a guidepost, a new competency-based curriculum was designed and ROADS (Redefining Our Academic Definition of School) was born in the fall of 2013.

How We Created Our Competencies

There are many factors to consider when looking at adopting a competency-based curriculum. Will it be project based? How much of the curriculum will be student selected? How will students navigate the course requirements? When looking at the curriculum with an at-risk lens, the questions seem to quadruple. As we navigated through this new course design we relied on some foundational principles. As mentioned above, the new curriculum had to be not only rigorous and based on standards, but it also had to be teacher, not computer, generated. It needed to be flexible to meet the needs of the diverse learners who needed this pathway to graduate. We wanted students to be able to self-select some aspects, but we wanted to be able to control what they were learning so that we could guarantee which standards they would be meeting. Most important, we wanted students to be able to move at their own pace.

With all of these requirements in place, we started to write our competency curriculum. Most of the students in the current program suggested that we make the curriculum for meeting the competency requirements as hands-on as possible. We looked to our community and surrounding areas for help. As ideas for competencies were generated, so too were ideas for field trips to show our students real-world relevance for the work they were doing in school in hopes that we would be able to motivate them and reengage their natural love of learning.

After looking at what our community had to offer, we looked at our district's list of standards. What did our students need to know in order to gain a high school diploma? How would it be guaranteed that they were learning just as much as, if not more than, their traditionally taught peers? This turned out to be easier than we thought. So many of the standards for reading and language arts could be addressed in a variety of ways in every subject, thus making ELA standards the easiest to subject to conjugation into competencies.

Since we wanted ROADS to be fairly hands on and field trip based, the science standards were the next to be evaluated. The area where the school is located is filled with many outdoor opportunities, such as state parks, wildlife refuges, arboretums, planetariums, and many museums. The field trips would serve as both a way for students to build background knowledge on the materials and as a springboard on which to base the competencies. However, we did not want to punish students who were unable to go on field trips by having their absence from a field trip stop them from graduating. Therefore, we made field trips

as something extra. Students who attended field trips would have reduced competency requirements since the field trips often proved to be more insightful and educational than expected. Because of the learning that occurred on these trips and because of the high poverty rate of the students in our school, all field trips would be cost-free to all students. Fees would be paid out of the programming budget to ensure that all students could attend.

It was important to our staff that the social studies curriculum parallel that of the traditional high school curriculum. The social studies competencies were written with document-based questioning at their core. Students would observe many primary and secondary sources to answer questions and to gather information to draft essays. How to look at the documents was taught in a gradual release format, starting at the beginning of the year, to help each student become familiar with the required questioning sequence and data-gathering method. Students would also use their background knowledge from trips to museums and local historical points of interest to add personal touches and self-selection to their competency completion.

Competencies for other subjects required for graduation were addressed in a similar method. Once the initial creation of competencies was started, it became easy to see how the standards could be applied to the classroom. However, even though all the standards were being met, we wanted our students to learn even more. We wanted to prepare them for the "real world" by exposing them to financial knowledge, alcohol and other drug abuse information, parenting resources, and many other topics that they would need to know about to make sound decisions. To accomplish this goal, we created a life skills competency area. Competencies in this area are almost completely hands on. For example, our students set up a bank account, filled out tax paperwork, or learned how to get health insurance. While these are not normally taught in a traditional high school curriculum, our at-risk students greatly needed to learn how to do them.

We anticipated a high demand from students who wanted to enter ROADS, but we needed to maintain a small class size to make sure students were getting the help they needed and to make the cost of field trips and transportation manageable. To ensure both goals, we developed a credit competency conversion document. The idea behind this document was twofold: We wanted students to gain "credit" for the classes they had successfully passed in traditional school, and we wanted to motivate students to do well in their high school classes since they would have less work to do once they switched programs. We did not want students to stop trying in class because they had been placed on a waitlist for ROADS; we wanted them to maintain the academic integrity expected of all students.

Impact on Literacy

One reason for the creation of the competency-based programming was because, according to state testing, the majority of our at-risk students were graduating with a reading level three or more years behind their grade level peers. What did our diploma mean if the students who earned it could not read and understand it? Literacy is part of every competency. Everything a student does requires reading, writing, talking, and listening. Because of this need, we decided students could not be exempt from certain competencies based on their traditional credits. No matter what their credits in English were prior

to entering ROADS, they would need to complete a reading log, daily journal writing, and grammar. Along with these requirements, each student would be required to participate in a reader's workshop three times a week for 30 minutes.

The first year, we tested students in October and May using STAR Reading and ACT Compass software testing to chart the growth students made in ROADS. Students averaged 3.6 years growth in reading in that seven-month time span. One student who entered ROADS with a third-grade reading level exited the program with a ninth-grade reading level. For the first time in their lives, students were seeing the positive side of reading books and the changes reading could make in their academic success.

Writing skills also were on the rise. Students' writing proficiency increased with expanded knowledge of grammar and research skills. Students who proclaimed to know only how to write in "text lingo" were drafting essay after essay. Why? Because they had to. In ROADS, there is no failure; students do not get the option to not do something. Every competency has to be completed with an 80% rate, or it is given back to the student to revise, a requirement previously unfamiliar to students. Students had no inclination that, once they had written something, they were not finished with it. Teaching students how to revise and look critically at their work and the work of their peers helped our students not only take pride in their work, but set their own expectations higher as well. Students started to see how important correct grammar and vocabulary usage was and the impression they left the reader with when they did not follow the "rules."

With the addition of a reader's workshop in ROADS, students for the first time were discovering that books were not boring. The classroom library was stocked with books to which these students could relate, including books on drugs, gangs, and other "tough" subjects that were not found in any other place in the school. Students also realized that the more they read, the easier reading became. Students who refused to pick up books at the start of the year because "reading was hard" were the same students in May who begged to have just a few more minutes to read. Students were not reading just because they had to; they started to read because they wanted to.

The rise in literacy was ROADS' biggest success. With the computer programs, literacy was hardly a focus. Students read only the minimum amount on the screens to get by and were never required to pick up a book. Writing was much the same. Students only filled in blanks to get the completion credit; they never wrote more than a few paragraphs. For the first time since at-risk data was tracked, our students' skill levels began to rise and catch up to that of their same grade peers. For many students, this was also the first time that they were able to find success academically.

Student Success

When we moved to a competency-based program and looked at the data we had gathered, we found that there were many areas of student success that could not be measured. Our graduation rate went up, our test scores were up, and student truancy was down, but more important, students had found their "home." Students were not only connected deeply with a staff member, they were connected with each other as well. Students began to see each other as a second family and to form the connections that were missing with the

computer-based curriculum. Many of these students did not have positive healthy relationships before coming into the program. Now, they not only had the mentor relationship with the staff member, but they also had positive peer relationships with their classmates. These relationships became a sturdy foundation for students to rely on for support when making healthy changes in their social lives and have lasted beyond graduation.

We changed from computers to competencies because of lost connections. ROADS had enabled the student relationship connection, but did we have the school connection? Looking at truancy data, we did. In 2012, at-risk students were truant from school an average of 3.5 days a week. In 2013, that number dropped to 1.3 days a week. We asked students why and the answer was unanimous. School was no longer just busy work; it now had meaning. Because graduation was tied to "show me what you know," not "sit here until May," students now saw their exit from school as a reality and no longer some unattainable idea. Students also saw how the things they were working on in class related to their life outside of school. School was no longer about busy work and worksheets; it finally connected with their lives. This connection transformed our attendance data since students wanted to come to school because missing a day meant not only missing classwork, but also adding one more day until they could graduate.

While we had a lot of data to support the success of ROADS, there were a lot of areas of growth that could not be measured. Through ROADS, students, for the first time in their lives, ventured outside our county and outside our state, went to a non-fast-food restaurant, saw a play, went to a college campus, and much more. The experiences that students were walking away with and the lasting relationships they had formed in the classroom became the biggest draw of our program. Students wanted to be admitted to ROADS because of the environment and culture that we had created, not because it was seen as the only option to graduate. We took the stigma of alternative education and flipped it on its head—something that never would have happened if we had not canned the "canned" curriculum.

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About the Author

Rachel Ann Tambornino, MS, is the At-Risk Coordinator for the Mauston School District in Mauston, WI, USA. She works with the National At-Risk Education Network-Wisconsin to help improve the literacy of students in alternative programming. Her research interests include alternative schooling, literacy, and student engagement.

Youth Voice

Engaging Youth in Prague: One School's Skills for Life Program

Rebecca Antblad, Ben Antrobus, Sam Roberts, and Stephanie Seidl

Ben, Sam, Stephanie, and Rebecca in Prague, Czech Republic

Preface

Terry Pickeral, President, Cascade Educational Consultants, Bellingham, WA, USA

Riverside Junior High School in Prague provides an inspiring and challenging education that engages students through a dynamic and innovative curriculum. To motivate students to reach great heights and explore new initiatives through a variety of projects, the school offers the Skills for Life Program, designed to provide participants with higher levels of challenge. Overall program activities include instruction and participation in seasonal sports, arts, music, and theatre. Each of the activities students choose focuses on individual and team skill development.

Rebecca Antblad, Ben Antrobus, Sam Roberts, and Stephanie Seidl, four participants in the Skills for Life Program, share their experiences and the insights gained through the program's specialized instruction. Their voices document how engagement led to knowledge and skill development. Their observations regarding the value of the specialized instruction indicate that they were able to raise their self-esteem and develop their leadership and teamwork skills. The students' voices provide a first-hand perspective while also providing a set of implications for other students to consider developing in their schools to cultivate students leadership and for teachers to nurture and support student engagement.

Stephanie Seidl:

Kids have lots of after-school opportunities here at Riverside. We call them "Skills for Life," and they're offered every weekday afternoon, including Saturdays. Students can row, rock climb, sail, do robotics, play football, learn tennis and so much more. I am currently in Year 8 and I've already participated in both the rowing and sailing. I particularly loved sailing and was able to use my newly acquired skills on a family vacation last summer. These activities helped me relax, clear my mind, and develop new friendships. It

was also nice to have so many year groups represented. Not only did students in Years 7-10 participate, but parents joined every once in a while, too.

Still, I believe that our school's Skills for Life program could improve in three ways. Currently, teachers determine the activities as well as their scheduling. I believe students should be part of the planning process and be consulted about what we most like to do after school. While many students enjoy the current options, there are things that they would like to do that are presently not being offered. I think our enthusiasm for and participation in Skills for Life would increase if our principal implemented a communication process or even created a committee that enabled student input.

Rebecca Antblad:

First, I want to say that I agree with Stephanie that mixing all the junior high year levels for school activities is a good thing. I personally think it builds a sense of community. Otherwise, we just find identity within our own tutor groups and grade levels. We have two special weeks during the year where all students are brought together to work on projects: Science and International Weeks. I just think that the more we do this, the better. It particularly helps the Year 7 students integrate with the larger group.

In addition to what Stephanie has written, I believe that service is also an important part of our Skills for Life program and student culture. For instance, twice a month, a group of 10 junior high students regularly supply and serve a breakfast to homeless people in Prague. We bring and distribute nonfood stuff as well, such as shampoo, razors, toothpaste, and other items. The students who participate in this—myself included—find this activity meaningful and enlightening. As a result, I'm personally more aware of the human needs around me and am more sensitive to my responsibility to help others. In addition to this, the entire student body recently joined in a bottle cap drive in order to raise money to help a person with a disability buy a wheelchair. On top of this, the PTA moms hosted several bake sales at school and then sent the money to a project helping people rebuild in the Philippines.

While we are certainly making a difference in our world, I think we students can do a better job and take a greater leadership role at school. We tend to follow the lead of the adults and the service projects are generally their vision, not ours. I believe that if students were in charge of service at school, it's very possible that we would choose to serve different people in different ways.

I also wonder if we students could do a better job in making our school a more comfortable, challenging and kind place (not that it isn't already kind, challenging, and comfortable). But still, sometimes kids get bullied or feel like they don't belong. As good as things are, improvements can always be made in our school's culture. I wonder, what if the principal met regularly with a group of us (representing all year levels) to talk about how the kids are doing? I'm thinking that it could be something like a school "temperature check" committee. Committee members could share how they feel things are going and offer advice to the principal on how to make the school a kinder, more challenging and comfortable place for students.

Ben Antrobus:

I agree with both Rebecca and Stephanie that while Riverside Junior High offers a very friendly space for learning, we (the students) should play a larger leadership role in

some areas of school life. That said, we have a very active student council. They meet once a week with both the principal and an advising teacher. Students feel very safe with these two adults and are willing to openly share their ideas with them present. Our student council brings students together and works hard to create a sense of family among the students. Last year, I was on the student council and we planned a riverboat Christmas disco and a bowling disco, organized the Mad Hair Day, and raised some money for charity. This year's student council is involved in similar activities.

So, while our student government obviously does good work, it could do more on issues relating to building a better school, both socially and academically. Similar to Rebecca's idea, the Student Council could act as advisors to the principal and be the voice of students on issues like school rules, how teachers teach, service opportunities, and after school activities. I've also heard that some schools include students on their boards of directors. It would be great if our student council had a representative on Riverside's board. I think those adults would benefit from our input. However, for the student council to take on a more important role like this, we would need to make sure its members are serious. Unfortunately, some students get elected because of popularity, and, as a result, do nothing. Perhaps our school should have tougher criteria for student-elected leaders to ensure they are up for the responsibility of leadership.

Sam Roberts:

While I agree with my friends that Riverside isn't perfect, I believe it's pretty close. The teachers are good. The environment is good. In fact, school is a very happy place for most of us students. I even consider my teachers and peers as members of my family. There are reasons for this, of course. Our teachers genuinely care about and respect us and want us to succeed. If I email them a question on the weekends, they promptly answer me. They're available during breaks, lunches, and after school. And it's not just them, it's my principal too. If I ever have a problem or a question, she's always available, approachable, and ready to listen to me. The students also take care of each other. If I temporarily fall out with a friend, there's always someone there to catch and include me in what they're doing. So, as you can see, Riverside school offers an extremely positive and emotionally safe environment.

That doesn't mean we can't improve. We can. While most of our lessons are engaging and include a lot of projects, they're not always as effective as they could be. Also, while most of our teachers are very open to suggestions from students on how they can improve, we students don't always share our reactions and reflections. One way to do this is through regular student teacher evaluations. I think this would create a better way for us to provide feedback, help teachers, and improve learning in our subjects. After all, we students know best how we learn and what works and doesn't work in lessons.

Lastly, I think school adult leaders should consider including us students in developing the junior high curriculum. Perhaps we should have more options and choice in selecting our classes (like what currently exists with the languages). For instance, some students may love geography and really want to invest more time in it. Others may prefer history. I think Rebecca, Stephanie, and Ben's idea to include students more in the school decision-making process is a good one. Since we are the ones who attend classes, we should also help determine which classes we actually take.

For more information regarding these students' perspectives and the Skills for Life Program, please access www.terrypickeral.com/index.php/2015/10/11/adventures-in-engaging-and-learning-from-students/

Photo Gallery

(Photos provided by Terry Pickeral, Cascade Educational Consultants)

Ben, Sam, Stephanie, and Rebecca enjoyed a well-deserved opportunity for rest and reflection.

The students' experience encouraged a sense of camaraderie brought about through shared experiences.

Students Ben, Sam, Stephanie, and Rebecca chose to organize a field trip to a local castle in Prague.

ENGAGE: The International Journal of Research and Practice on Student Engagement

Call for Manuscripts

The National Dropout Prevention Center is pleased to sponsor *ENGAGE*: *The International Journal of Research and Practice on Student Engagement*. This journal is available free online for a global audience. It supports online discussions among its international readers concerning issues raised in its articles. In addition, it enables multimedia to share videos, photos, and links to other Web sites. *ENGAGE* is internationally refereed and published online twice a year.

ENGAGE raises awareness of issues related to student engagement in school and in learning as it explores and shares strategies and solutions that work globally. Journal articles will point to the fact that all constituencies need to be engaged in the school experience: students, teachers, administrators, parents, members of the community, businesses, social service organizations, and others, to support student engagement.

FOCUS: Manuscripts should be original works not previously published nor concurrently submitted for publication to other journals. Submissions should be written clearly in English for a diverse audience. Photographs, and other visual materials, are highly encouraged for each submission. The readership, international in scope, includes professionals conducting research on and/or working with the issue of engagement in school to promote student success, e.g., school administrators, teachers, educational psychologists, mental health professionals, juvenile justice and youth workers, governmental agency leaders, researchers, and academics. The articles for *ENGAGE* offer a mix of academic and practical; accompanied by voices of young people from diverse cultural groups around the world who have disengaged, are reengaging, or have a story about engagement, disengagement, or reengagement with school.

FORMAT: Manuscripts should follow APA style. Details can be found at www.apastyle.org. Manuscripts should not exceed 25 typed, double-spaced pages in 12-point font, including all cited references. Please submit via email attachment in MSWord format (.doc or .docx) to engageeditor@dropoutprevention.org. Additional items to supplement the manuscript may include Web links, videos, photographs, and other media. Photographs, figures, and charts must be submitted as separate files in pdf or jpeg format and must be at least 300 dpi.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES: Each article should include an up to 150-word, APA style abstract, with one difference: The final sentence or two should be composed as starter-questions to engage readers in a window of asynchronous discussion based on the article's points.

There are three categories of submissions:

1. Academic Research. In addition to the submitted manuscript, please include a cover page with the following information: the author's full name, title, department, institution or professional affiliation, email address, and phone number; and the full names of coauthors with their titles, departments, institutions or professional affiliations, and email addresses. Do not include any identifying information on the text pages. All appropriate manuscripts will be submitted for a blind review by two reviewers.

2. Practitioners. Manuscripts may include school and community-based research on services for youth or a description of successful strategies related to teaching, counseling, administrative procedures, or community engagement. Include all above information; however, in this category, the editor will be making the final selection, and there will be no peer review.

3. Youth Voice. These submissions represent the youth perspective on their school and/or community and should be submitted via their teacher, school administrator, or mentor.

Manuscripts may be submitted at any time for review. If accepted, the authors will be notified of publication by email. There is no publication fee.

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