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1-1-1985

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Recommended Citation

Powell, Norman and Maciocia, Tony, "An International Exchange Program: Self-Esteem Building and Relationship Development for Youth and Staff" (1985). Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Faculty and Staff Research. 13.

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AN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE PROGRAM: SELF-ESTEEM BUILDING AND RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT FOR YOUTH AND STAFF

Norman Powell and Tony Maciocia

ABSTRACT: Troubled youth can manage, and benefit from, short intensive relationship-centered experiences. This article reports on an innovative staff and client exchange program involving groups from Montreal, Quebec and Washington, D.C. Such experiences, as well as enhancing the youths' cultural awareness and self-esteem, provide exciting staff-development opportunities.

Introduction

It has been said that "the child is father of the man;" that what one experiences at an early age can drastically influence one's perception and direction as an adult.

The great majority of youngsters in group care programs, classified as emotionally disturbed or delinquent, are youngsters whose levels of self-esteem are very low (Ainsworth & Fulcher, 1981; Trieschman, 1969). They are also youngsters whose histories typically demonstrate an inability to establish and maintain meaningful relationships.

Programs for troubled youngsters must be designed to provide them with experiences that will have a constructive impact on their levels of self-esteem (Brendtro & Ness, 1983). It was with this concept in mind that the Youth Horizons Reception Center in Montreal, Canada and the Associates for Renewal in Education in Washington, D.C., U.S.A., undertook the task of developing an innovative international exchange for a group of their youngsters and staff.

Description of Agencies

Youth Horizons Reception Center is an agency which provides residential services for psycho-socially maladjusted children within the English-speaking population of Montreal, Quebec. Youth Horizons offers a continuum-of-care for both pre-adolescent and adolescent youngsters. From among the Youth Horizons program, the Dornal Group Home was selected to participate in the international exchange program.

Dornal Group Home is a coeducational, community-based program providing a highly-structured environment for adolescent youth who require close supervision and intensive counselling, but are able to benefit from a community environment. The long-term goal of the program is to reintegrate the youth into a more normalized environment.

Associates for Renewal in Education (ARE) is a non-profit social service agency located in Washington, D.C. The Group Home Division is one of ARE's service delivery divisions. One of the primary goals of the Group Home Division is to provide a community-based, group-living alternative for delinquent youth. The Division is comprised of three group homes. Dupont I and Dupont II are short-term programs that provide residential care to youth who have had difficulty with the law but are not considered to be serious threats to themselves or to members of the community. Dupont III is a long-term program (six months to two years) that services delinquent youth between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one. All three group homes provide the residents with an environment that is supportive and therapeutic. The ultimate goal is to reintegrate these youth into the community as productive young adults.

Selection of Participants

Five youngsters and two child care workers from each of the agencies were chosen. It was the staff's feeling that a group of this size would allow for both the necessary individual work with youngsters and permit the development of a cohesive group experience. Both group home programs had youngsters and Child Care Workers, who remained as host for the visiting groups.

The selection of the youngsters was based on the treatment teams belief that the chosen youth would benefit from such an experience. The youth from Youth Horizons were all from the Dornal program while the youth from ARE were chosen from the three different Dupont programs.

Youth Characteristics

The two groups of youngsters had similarities and differences. The youngsters from the Dornal Group Home were referred to the program for several reasons. These included truancy, curfew violations, breaking limits, absences without permission, and minor incidents of stealing. The youngsters from the Dupont Group Home had been referred by the Court for delinquent acts such as burglary, robbery, shoplifting, and the use and distribution of drugs.

Both groups were in need of daily supervision and structured programming, but their underlying problems did not indicate that they should be placed in a locked institutional facility. The problems that did exist were very similar even though the severity and classification of their presenting problems, at the time of referral, were different. The underlying issues of low self-esteem, unrealistic perceptions of the world, and a tremendous lack of self-confidence, were common to both groups. There was also much similarity in the ways in which these underlying issues were manifested in their observable behavior. These included: poor peer relationships, delinquent and antisocial behavior, learning problems in school, difficulties with group living situations, a general mistrust of adults, and a skepticism of the value of relationships.

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Preplanning Stage

The initial planning for the international exchange began late in 1983. It was the first time that a project of this nature had been undertaken by either agency. Much thought, therefore, was given to the arrangements and the overall logistics of the project. The planning involved both group homes and included such things as exchanging brief background information about the youngsters, photographs of the youth, regular group meetings, parental consent, travel planning, letters of authorization to cross the borders, budgeting, regular phone communications, medical and travel insurance. Once the youngsters were chosen, they involved themselves in work in the community in order to earn money to spend while away.

The Trip

The departure date, for both groups, was August 19th, 1984. The group from the U.S.A. left on the morning of August 19th and met the group from Canada at a motor lodge in upstate New York late that evening. The group from Montreal had driven down for the meeting earlier in the day.

The staff described how excited with anticipation the youth from Montreal were as they watched the ARE staff and residents drive up. It was the first time that any of these youngsters had even met youth from their respective cities. The youngsters from Dornal had never been to Washington, D.C. and the youngsters from Dupont Group Home had never been to Montreal.

Both the ARE staff and the Youth Horizons staff were amazed at how easily and quickly the two groups of youngsters began to relate and interact with each other. After an evening of meeting, sharing and conversation, the groups retired for the night. The next morning, the groups parted and continued on to the cities they were to visit.

The week-long trip consisted of a number of exciting and interesting activities for both groups. For the youngsters from Montreal, who were staying at the Dupont III Home in Washington, the activities included sight-seeing tours of the national landmarks of Washington, a trip to Wild World, a birthday party and an outside barbeque on the last day of the visit.

The ARE staff and residents stayed at the Dornal Group Home in Montreal where they were hosted by staff and residents of the program. The activities included sight-seeing tours of the city, a horse-drawn carriage ride in Old Montreal, canoeing on Canadian lakes, horseback riding, and visits to some of the other group homes of Youth Horizons.

On August 24, 1984, the ARE staff and residents said their farewells and began their journey back to Washington and the Dupont Group Home. On the same day, the group from Youth Horizons began their return trip to Montreal. On the return journey, the two groups met again in upstate New York to spend a last

night together before making the final drives to their respective home destinations. This meeting of the two groups provided them with the opportunity to compare and share the experiences that they had while visiting each others country.

Group Feedback

As a means of obtaining some measurement of the impact of the experience on the participants, a questionnaire was developed and used as a post-assessment instrument.

The participants in both groups were asked the same questions which included: What were your preconceived ideas about the Canadians/Americans? What were the things you liked the most about your trip? What was it like to live and/or work with people from another country? What were the things you disliked the most on the trip? What were the most difficult adjustments that you had to make? What was the one thing that made the most lasting impression on you? How did you benefit from the experience?

There were a number of preconceived ideas held by the participants from both groups before the trip. In general, they were very similar. The Dornal Group Home thought that the Dupont Group Home residents and staff would be more racially mixed whereas the staff and residents were predominately black. The Dupont Group Home youth expected the Dornal Group Home residents and staff to be more racially mixed whereas the staff and residents were predominately white. Additionally, because the youth from Dupont were identified as presenting more serious behavior problems, the child care staff from both groups assumed that they would present more daily behavior management difficulties. This assumption proved false. Neither group presented the staff with any serious behavior problems.

Both groups had some ambivalence about the trip that was related to their anxieties about going into an unknown situation. Some of the youngsters from each group thought that the trip would be boring; however, most of them were excited about the prospect of seeing new places and meeting new people. For example, one of the Canadian youngsters was excited about the fact that he could break-dance and anticipated that he would be able to teach some of the youth in Washington how to do it. He later learned that break-dancing was a main activity of youths in Washington, D.C.

In discussing the things that they liked the most, both groups focused on the sights, the places they had visited and the activities they had enjoyed. For the youngsters from Montreal, the important things seemed to be the D.C. National Zoo, seeing the red shoes that Judy Garland wore in the "Wizard of Oz," and a visit to a large recreational park water slide. For the youngsters from Washington, it seemed to be visiting Old Montreal, canoeing on a Canadian lake and horseback riding in the Montreal countryside. In particular, one of the youth from Washington was excited because he was able to see mountains for the first

time and some of the youth from Canada were excited about seeing and swimming in the Atlantic Ocean for the first time. For one of them, it was the first time she had realized that the ocean was salty.

In response to the question, "what was it like to live or work with someone from another country," the answers, again, tended to be similar. Both staff and youth indicated that there were very few differences in terms of the day to day living in the two group homes. While youth from Canada and the youth from Washington felt that the houses that they stayed in during the trip were "very nice," some of the youngsters said that they had difficulty in sleeping at night because they were in a new environment.

The child care staff felt that the general structure of the Group Home they visited was similar to their own; however, they did notice differences in each others intervention styles. These differences were primarily due to the differences in the youth populations and in the treatment goals of each of the groups. Thus, the staff from the Dupont program, the more highly structured one, tended to be more behavioral in their responses to the youngsters acting-out, and the Dornal staff tended to be more counselling-oriented in their individual intervention. As well, the child care workers from both programs mentioned that they found the discussions that they had concerning these differences in their theory and practice of child care invaluable.

One of the things mentioned as the most disliked aspect of the trip was the intra-group arguments that developed among the youth. It was also very difficult for both groups of youngsters to spend such an intensive period of time together without the freedom to spend time away from the group in the way they might normally be able to do in the context of their regular group home. In the group of youngsters from Dornal who typically have free community time to spend involved in their own activities, the increase of intra-group tension was very apparent.

While the exchange of information beforehand was of some help, one of the most demanding adjustments for staff was in planning and developing beforehand, a week-long program that would meet the needs of an unknown group of youngsters who were coming to visit. During the exchange itself, the most difficult adjustments seemed to be in meeting so many new people in such a short period of time and in adapting to the subtle differences in the use of language and communication styles of the different groups.

While some of the things which left the most lasting impressions were, of course, the things the individuals liked the most (or those they disliked the most), the staff indicated that watching the two groups of youngsters meeting, interacting, and enjoying each other will remain with them for a long time as a pleasurable experience.

For the children, the most lasting impression seemed to have been formed by the experience of "meeting new friends who had similar problems," and in "saying the last goodbye."

Finally, in response to the question of "how did you benefit from the experience," the following quote served to highlight the staff's feelings: "The experience made me feel closer to my co-workers." Similarly, the youngsters felt: "I got to know the kids in my group home better."

Conclusion and Recommendations

In evaluating this international exchange experience, there are several conclusions that can be reached. Clearly, this experience was of benefit to the staff and youngsters that were involved (including the youngsters and staff who remained in their own group home as hosts). There is a need for similar such exchanges between other agencies and programs. (These could be done locally, nationally and internationally in an effort to enhance better relationships and communication among youth and Child Care Workers).

In this particular exchange program, it happened that the group from Montreal was predominately white and the group from Washington was predominately black; consequently, it was both a cross cultural and cross-racial experience for all involved. It is also interesting to note that despite cultural, racial and social history differences many of the underlying issues were similar for the youngsters in both groups. However, the behavioral manifestations were somewhat different and these differences were directly related to factors of culture and to the previous experiences to which the youths were exposed.

Such exchanges can provide child care workers with unique opportunities for growth and skill development by sharing ideas, models, approaches, systems, techniques and philosophies. The exchanges can offer both staff and youth excellent opportunities for relationship building.

For youngsters whose level of self-esteem is low and who have difficulty in forming relationships, we found from the feedback that even though the participants were anxious about meeting (which is quite understandable), both youth and staff were able to begin conversation and discuss areas of interest with each other. All participants were personally challenged by this opportunity, and after taking initial risks, everyone felt quite comfortable. The week-long activities also demonstrated continued relationship growth within the group, even though all the participants knew at the same time that the experience was time-limited. Also significant was the youngsters' feedback concerning their lasting impressions, which placed emphasis on meeting new friends with similar problems and saying last goodbyes.

For a short period of time, the youngsters were able to meet new people, form relationships, participate in new environments, separate and return to their homes. Upon return, some telephone and letter communication occurred for the youngsters.

Plans are currently being developed to have another exchange between the group home programs of Youth Horizons and Associates for Renewal in Education in the near future. The next exchange will incorporate some modifications and changes as a result of what was learned from this first experience.

In reviewing this exchange experience, it was felt that some of the stress factors within the group experience should be considered for future exchanges. These areas include a shorter travelling period, early identification of the participants, a longer planning period, group development and group size.

This international exchange concept is offered as another program option for agencies to consider along with their other treatment strategies for youth and staff development.

Footnote

The authors wish to acknowledge the participation of Martha Allman and Arlyn Tapp from Dornal Group Home, along with Philip Davis and Reginald Spivey from Dupont Group Homes, all Child Care Workers who felt the importance of having such a program. Without their enthusiasm, such a program experience could not have occurred.

This project was partially supported by a grant from the Youth Horizons Foundation.

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