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ABSTRACT

The Student Literacy Corps of Fitchburg State College, Massachusetts, in cooperation with the surrounding community, implemented a successful literacy program whose primary goal was to nurture and develop literacy opportunities and awareness of cultural diversity for area youth and adults. College students (for whom this is an elective course) provide the learning tools for their tutees, assist them with instructional strategies, provide encouragement and moral support, and closely monitor their successes and their setbacks. The ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the college tutor and his or her tutee are usually different, allowing both individuals to learn about the other's culture and to understand cultural influences on behavior. The Student Literacy Corps is a community effort: college administrators, faculty, and students; community social service agencies; the community adult learning center; local businesses; and individuals form the community work collaboratively to instill or further develop a sense of pride in all the individuals involved. Program outcomes included: (1) elementary level students developed more positive attitudes toward reading and writing; (2) most high school students improved their grades; (3) all of the adults passed key sections of the Graduate Equivalency Diploma final exam; and (4) tutors' understanding of themselves, the community, and the daily forces affecting the lives and education of children, adolescents, and adults increased. (Contains 16 references.) (RS)

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Literacy, multicultural, and socio-cultural  
considerations: Student Literacy Corps and the community

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Abstract

The Student Literacy Corps of Fitchburg State College in cooperation with the surrounding community, implemented a successful literacy program whose primary goal is to nurture and develop literacy opportunities and successes for area youth and adults while simultaneously helping all participants development an appreciation of their cultural diversity. Multicultural and socio-cultural considerations, community and college involvement, and insights and outcomes of the program are discussed.

Literacy, multicultural, and socio-cultural considerations: Student Literacy Corps and the community Fitchburg, Massachusetts, originally founded as a mill town, is a community with a rapidly increasing African American, Asian, and Hispanic, particularly Puerto Rican population. It is also the site of Fitchburg State College, a regional institution with approximately 5000 undergraduate students. Fitchburg was an ideal location for the federally funded Student Literacy Corps grant. This grant, awarded in 1990, led to the establishment of a Literacy Corps Program at the college. The youth and adults served by the program include white, African American, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and Pakistani. This project's primary goal is to nurture and develop literacy opportunities and successes for area youth, children, and adults while simultaneously helping all participants develop an appreciation of this culturally diverse community. This paper will describe the program and focus on the multicultural and socio-cultural aspects of the project.

Program description

A new elective college course, "Literacy Corps", was developed for college students who would take part in the program. Undergraduate students from a variety of college majors enroll in this course and meet with an instructor one evening per week. Required readings and class discussions provide the college students with a knowledge base regarding pertinent issues in literacy education, including bilingual education, the use of various dialects of English, the influence of bilingualism on literacy development, approaches to reading instruction for newly literate adults, literacy assessment, and how literacy might effect one's economic and social development.

Decisions about the course were shaped by the fact that many of the participating college students are non-education majors, or are first or second year students with little training or familiarity with literacy development and tutorial situations. For example, we had to consider the experience of our tutors as we selected and developed the assessment tools they would use. Likewise, all decisions regarding the discussion topics for the weekly seminar class meetings, and the type of instruction, guidance, and supervision provided by the

course instructor throughout the semester, were fashioned by the inexperience of our tutors.

Each school or community agency involved with our program identifies individuals who are most in need of tutorial services to foster their literacy development. The college students then administer a series of informal assessments to gather information concerning the tutee's feelings about reading and writing, their interests, their reading behaviors, and their reading and writing strengths and needs. Informal assessment procedures are used because they are more flexible and can be readily adapted to varied situations (Johnston, 1990). After analyzing the information gathered from the assessments, the college student, the tutee, and the classroom teacher or site manager work collaboratively to develop a study plan.

The college students provide the learning tools for their tutees, assist them with instructional strategies, provide encouragement and moral support and closely monitor their successes and their setbacks. The two work as a team to allow each tutee to travel along his or her personal path of literacy development. The college students work cooperatively and intensively with each site manager or teacher to meet the needs of each tutee.

Additionally, parents and families are contacted to let them know that the tutoring relationship has been established. They are also asked to evaluate their child's or family member's progress at the end of the semester utilizing an attitudinal scale developed by Fredericks and Rasinski (1990). It is important to look at the individual's current abilities and performance, to consider his interests and future goals, to assess and utilize all resources currently available to him or her when developing the study plan (Robinson, 1990).

Each weekly course session begins with an opportunity for the college students to express any concerns or problems they have regarding their tutorial situations. This provides a valuable learning opportunity for all members of the class. The instructor provides guidance to ameliorate difficulties and encourages other class members to offer their support and suggestions. The atmosphere created is one in which the college students are willing to seek help from, and provide assistance to, each other. The entire venture is one that fosters the mutual sharing, learning, and personal growth of all individuals involved. As a result of this program, the college students develop valuable insights into the lives of their learning partners. Students are encouraged to

share these insights in class as well as write about them in their journals.

### Multicultural and Socio-Cultural Considerations

Readers comprehend differently because every reader is culturally and individually unique (Machet, 1992). Literacy education makes it possible to broaden our awareness of other people's individuality, their needs, their hopes and dreams. The Literacy Corps Program at Fitchburg State College considers this awareness extremely important in that it enables the participants to better coexist in the real world of diverse people.

The ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the college tutor and their tutee are usually different, allowing both individuals to learn about the other's culture and to understand cultural influences on behaviors. Variables of social, political, and economic conditions affect the way people think, speak and behave. In order to really understand learners whose cultures are different from our own, we must develop an awareness and understanding of their cultural community (Finders, 1992). It is culture not biology, that shapes human life and the human mind (Barrera, 1992). Whetten (1991) indicates that over the past three decades, schools in the United States have seen a tremendous increase in the number of students from

culturally diverse backgrounds. Educators must be aware of cultural influences and use them in order to develop effective instructional strategies for all students (Ferdman, 1990).

The teacher's acceptance or rejection of students' language is a key factor influencing literacy learning (Goodman, 1987; Collins, 1989). For this reason, tutors work with the bilingual participants to help them develop pride in their ability to speak two or more languages. Whenever possible, students are encouraged to use their first language as part of the learning process. Research evidence shows that bilingual students are most successful when their first language is used to develop academic concepts (Freeman & Freeman, 1993). Research also indicates a close tie between valuing one's language and self esteem (Williams & Snipper, 1990). Anthropologists, linguists, and psychologists tell us that children of even the poorest families participate fully in the language of their culture (McGill-Franzen, & Allington, 1991).

Because the college students spend sixty hours with their tutees, powerful working relationships with their learning partners are established. This allows the college students to see that literacy development is

dependent on what the individuals bring to the learning situation, their skills, life experiences, daily responsibilities, aspirations, and commitment to reach their goals. What a text really means to its readers, depends on what the individual readers bring to the reading situation. What they bring will depend on cultural background, training, values, experience, and ideology (Williams & Snipper, 1990; McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1991).

The relationship between literacy and culture is bi-directional (Ferdman, 1990). Not only will cultural identity mediate acquisition and expression of literacy, but literacy education will also influence and mold the individual's cultural identity. In this sense, literacy educators can be seen as agents of cultural change. That is why they must understand the culturally-related assumptions underlying literacy practice and recognize that learners' responses in literacy situations are not random, but in fact usually reflect the learner's cultural perspective. Literacy goes beyond the printed or written page. It extends beyond the learner's ability to comprehend written language and manipulate its symbols. Literacy encompasses the ways in which different

people use their cultural values, beliefs, and customs to make sense of the world (Ferdman, 1990).

#### Community and College Involvement

The Student Literacy Corps project is truly a community effort. College administrators, faculty, and students; community social service agencies; the community adult learning center; local businesses; and individuals from the community work collaboratively to instill or further develop a sense of pride in all the individuals involved. Communities can provide the collective power that individuals do not have (Gregg & Robson, 1990). The reward of working with the community can be great in the generation of support, help, and participation. Without the help of the community, it is likely that even the best planned program will dwindle and die (Hinojosa, 1991).

Pencils and buttons with the Literacy Corps slogan "Helping each other grow" are distributed to participants at the beginning of each semester. These items serve to spread the name of the Literacy Corps, which helps in the recruitment of college student participants for the following semester. This type of publicity is an excellent way for community businesses and organizations to support literacy programs. The tutees, particularly

the elementary level students, enjoy wearing the buttons and explaining to their peers that they study with a college student.

At the end of each semester, a recognition ceremony is held to honor the tutees and tutors. Sometimes the tutees bring one of their parents or other family members to join in the celebration. The college students are presented with a certificate to acknowledge their commitment in time and effort to assist the tutees along their literacy paths. The college students then present their tutees with a certificate of recognition for their efforts to improve their literacy skills. At this point in the ceremony, the college students comment on the accomplishments of their tutees. Some tutees choose to recognize the efforts of their tutors as well. The powerful bond that develops is evident in the words and occasional tears of these individuals as they speak about their learning relationships and their shared accomplishments. An atmosphere of shared pride in the accomplishments of all participants is created as the guests share refreshments, listen to a guest speaker, and mingle following the certificate presentations.

Additionally, the tutees receive a packet of information from the College's Admissions Office and

Financial Aid Office to encourage them to consider college as a part of their future academic plan. Various speakers from the college and community agencies address the group to praise their efforts and commitment to the project. Local bookstores and libraries donate books that are given to the tutees which helps promote independent reading and gives tutees an opportunity to own their own books (U.S. Department of Education, 1986). For some, this is a first.

#### Program Outcomes

The tutors and tutees as well as the community benefit greatly from The Literacy Corps Program. The following is a list of outcomes that we have observed and documented by reading the tutors' journals and reviewing the tutees progress throughout the semester.

- Elementary level students develop more positive attitudes toward reading and writing. They initiate more independent reading for pleasure, and improve their writing skills.
- Most high school students improve their grades and maintain an acceptable level of quality in their homework performance, while increasing

their independent study strategies.

- All of the adults move closer to receiving their Graduate Equivalency Diploma by passing key sections of the final exam.
- Tutees demonstrate increased confidence to attempt literacy related tasks.
- The tutoring experience allows non-education majors to explore the joys of teaching and as a result, some college students decide to pursue a teaching career.
- Education majors feel better prepared to enter the teaching field. Their compassion, concern, and commitment to teach grows during the Literacy Corps experience.
- Tutors' understanding of themselves, the community, and the daily forces affecting the lives and education of children, adolescents, and adults increases.
- Tutors state a desire to continue

volunteering their tutorial services at Adult Learning Centers in their home communities.

- Tutors learn that literacy is a big part of one's culture and cannot be separated from the context of the tutee's situation.
- The tutors form a new appreciation for their own life situations and opportunities.

The Student Literacy Corps project at Fitchburg State College is a powerful example of the possibilities promoted through a college-school-community partnership. The sense of personal pride in one's academic accomplishments, the sense of purpose in helping someone achieve their goals, the insights into the life experiences of others, the growth in awareness and appreciation of cultural differences, and the valuable friendships forged through the semester of learning, allow both tutees and tutors to grow as individuals.

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