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Creating Settings for Undergraduate Students' Involvement in Engaged Learning: The Case of the Michigan State University Adolescent Project

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Creating Settings for Undergraduate Students' Involvement in Engaged Learning: The Case of the Michigan State University Adolescent Project

Abstract

The Michigan State University Adolescent Project (MSUAP) is an experiential learning opportunity, which teaches students to work with adolescent youth and their families through referrals from the juvenile justice system. Through its engaged learning approach, students are taught to emphasize assets, build relationships, and recognize the context which influence social problems. The MSUAP is a two semester course where undergraduates receive 10 weeks of manual based training followed by assignment to work with a youth one on one. The student works with the youth for eight hours per week in the community setting. This article will describe the evolution of MSUAP as a model of pedagogy congruent with the outreach and engagement mission of today's higher education, summarize past research on the multiple impacts of the MSUAP model, and provide an in depth case study of the educational experience from the perspective of a participating student.

Keywords

Experiential learning, service learning, adolescents, juvenile justice system, diversion program

Introduction

The Michigan State University Adolescent Project (MSUAP) is an experiential learning opportunity (e.g., Jimenez, Onifade, Davidson & Hankins, 2010; Davidson, Redner, Mitchell, & Amdur, 1991). MSUAP, through its engaged learning approach, teaches students to work with adolescent youth and their families referred from the juvenile justice system in a way that emphasizes assets, builds relationships, and recognizes the contexts which influence social problems (Jimenez et al., 2010). Through service learning and strengths-based teaching modalities, students become exposed to the community and build upon their problem solving, conflict resolution, critical thinking, and interpersonal interaction skills (Jimenez et al., 2010). This article will provide historical context regarding the development of the MSUAP, an in-depth description of the MSUAP model, and the collaboration between community and university settings. It will summarize past research on the multiple impacts of the MSUAP model and provide, for the first time, an in-depth case study of the educational experience from the perspective of a participating student. The MSUAP was developed in the context of the historically ineffective interventions with delinquent youth and thus, the development of an alternative intervention model and the impact of MSUAP on engaged students was demonstrated through experimental studies and qualitative inquiry.

Social Problem: The Challenge of Delinquency

Development of the Juvenile Justice System

The MSUAP development took place within the context of the juvenile justice system. Historically, a separate juvenile court system was originally created as an alternative to the adult justice system in the late 1800s as a means for providing intervention more akin to a family than a criminal court (Siegel & Welsh, 2016). The emphasis was on rehabilitating youth to help them become more productive members of society rather than emphasizing punishment. The creation of a separate juvenile court system with this focus meant that youths' due process rights were essentially exchanged for the

“parent like” treatment of the juvenile court. However, this elimination of due process rights caused the court system to face criticism decades later. In the 1960s, *in re Gault*, the Supreme Court held that this “exchange” was mythical and ruled that the juvenile court had to follow due process procedures. Further, in the 1970s, researchers began to question the efficacy of treatment approaches; some researchers even concluded that “nothing works” in regard to solving delinquency (Bartollas & Schmallegger, 2017; Basta & Davidson, 1988).

At that time, juvenile crime was on the rise and so was public awareness of the social problem (Davidson et al., 2010). The judgement that nothing works overlooked promising results of other studies that indicated prevention and early intervention could influence the problem of delinquency in youth offenders. During this time, various interventions were being utilized such as behavioral interventions, counseling and therapy, deterrence approaches, and diversion, to name a few. These approaches occurred in institutional or community based settings and research of these approaches provided mixed reviews often due to weaknesses in small sample sizes, unbiased data collectors, multiple measures of recidivism outcomes, and systematic variation (Basta & Davidson, 1988). So, while there was some promising evidence for alternative ways of addressing juvenile delinquency, there was still more research to be done. It was in this context that the MSUAP was developed.

Development of Experiential Learning in Higher Education

While the juvenile justice system was facing improvements, so was higher education in terms of the way students are taught. The term experiential learning developed from philosophies of several 20th century scholars—prominently John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, and Carl Rogers (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Their original theory has guided the way experiential learning is utilized in academia as a way for students to experience more hands-on learning beyond the context of the university setting and the traditional classroom. When experiential learning is utilized, it brings something new to the classroom in that students become more engaged in the subject, experience enhanced performance, and learn new problem-solving skills (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

Research has shown that experiential learning leads to improved learning outcomes. Experiential learning holds value in higher education because students who engage in this process have more positive beliefs towards service and their community as well as more positive attitudinal, moral, personal, social, and cognitive outcomes. Further, experiential learning is beneficial in that it makes university resources accessible to communities through partnerships that address community needs (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). In short, experiential learning through engaged partnerships has been a benefit to universities, the educational experiences of students, and community settings.

The Development of an Effective Intervention

As mentioned above, it had been difficult to find solutions to juvenile delinquency due to a lack of consistent or reliable findings (Davidson, Redner, Blakely, Mitchell, & Emshoff, 1987; Lipsey, Howell, Kelly, Chapman, & Carver, 2010). Further, there was evidence to suggest that traditional programs for delinquent youth that resided within correctional settings were ineffective and expensive (Davidson et al., 1977; Lowenkamp, Latessa, Smith, 2006). Despite this situation, there had been recommendations made throughout the prior research as far as what components might be most effective in managing juvenile delinquency. These recommendations included: a) conduct interventions in community settings, b) use strength based, cognitive behavioral, and environmentally focused interventions, c) use nonprofessionals as volunteers to increase efficiency and intensity of interventions, d) divert offenders from the juvenile justice system to avoid the harmful labeling effects that comes with court involvement (Davidson et al., 1987; 1991; Lipsey, 2009).

The Michigan State University Adolescent Project

The MSUAP is an intervention designed around these suggestions in that it is community-based, utilizes nonprofessionals, focuses on strengths from a behavioral and environmental perspective, and utilizes diversion tactics (Davidson et al., 1987). During this time, there were also many pushes towards utilizing community based programs, as that was becoming increasingly popular in other social service fields (Davidson et al., 1977). The use of nonprofessionals also became more significant during this time due to a low supply and low fiscal support of professionals. Even if there

was enough money and enough trained professionals to fill the gaps, the modalities used would be traditional casework or psychotherapeutic methods that had been shown to have low impact on juvenile offenders.

MSUAP as a Collaborative Approach

The use of diversion tactics stemmed from the original creation of a separate juvenile court as a means for keeping youth out of the adult court system and ultimately diverting them away from further involvement with the traditional court system. This crisis in the juvenile justice system is what brought Michigan State University (MSU) and the Ingham County Juvenile Court system together. This collaboration was made possible due to an initial agreement between NIMH's Center for Studies of Crime and Delinquency, the Psychology Department at MSU, and the Ingham County Juvenile Court. When MSUAP was initiated, the goal was to design a model that would join together the university and community in a way that would effectively address juvenile delinquency and provide a sustainable partnership (Jimenez et al., 2010). This collaboration was made possible due to the various skills and knowledge both the university and community provided. The community brought organizational support, referrals from the juvenile court, access to records, a setting, and practice expertise (Jimenez et al., 2010). The university provided staff, students, research methodologies, and theoretical knowledge about effective interventions. Thus, the MSUAP was designed in a way to implement recommendations regarding diversion interventions, with an emphasis on creating a positive collaboration between the community and university settings.

Additionally, within the university context, the MSUAP provided an ideal vehicle to provide a context for student involvement in outreach and engagement. The MSUAP is unique in that: a) it involves the university in collaboration with a community setting; creating a unique program in which students receive an educational experience, b) it is more than the typical "internship" in which students are "sent" to an existing community setting, c) it involves both university researchers and community juvenile justice leaders collaborating to create a new setting which would not only support effective community action but would facilitate and support community research (Davidson, Petersen, & Winslow, 2010).

In addition to creating a new setting collaboratively with the university and the community, with its requisite interactive structure, this new setting also involved new roles for youth and students. Youth referred to the program did not become a client, patient, or probationer of MSUAP, but rather a self-sufficient individual that could learn to become his or her own advocate to ensure that when their time in the program ended, they could still navigate social support systems on their own. Students also took on an alternative role, becoming more independent and more like partners with university faculty and staff.

Course Structure

An overall goal of the MSUAP has been to utilize college undergraduates as change agents that intervene directly with youth and their families, as well as stimulate/coordinate needed environmental resources. The undergraduates are enrolled in a two-semester course (four credits per semester). They receive 10 weeks of manual mastery based training, which educates students on individual and social causes of delinquency, importance of skill development, importance of community resource utilization, alternative solutions to social problems, and active research skills (Jimenez et al., 2010). Following the manual based training, students are given the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills developed in the classroom through assignment to a youth and family, with whom the advocate works with one-on-one. Following matching, they work eight hours per week in the community setting with and on behalf of their youth and family. Specific activities are based on collaboration and dual concerns of the youth and advocate.

The MSUAP provides an opportunity for students to learn how to design individualized interventions through community collaboration, sharing of resources, and joint planning that utilizes community and university knowledge (Jimenez et al., 2010). Once matched, they are supervised by project staff. Training is intense and involves weekly readings, quizzes, a presentation, and class participation in role play exercises and discussions (Jimenez et al., 2010). The training and supervision segments of the experience occur in small groups (six to eight students) and classes meet for two and a half hours per week throughout the two semesters. During the supervision portion of the experience, students come to class prepared to share information about their case- intervention activities and goals for

the following week. Students then receive feedback from project staff and their classmates, which provides a way for students to grow and learn from each other. Each small group is staffed by two project personnel. Each student works with one and only one youth.

Sustainability

The MSUAP is a program that has been in existence for over 40 years and thus has a long-term standing relationship with the community and Ingham County Juvenile Court. This university-community collaboration was built on a sustainable model to ensure this partnership continues. The MSUAP has expanded its reach and is now included in university and county budgets, therefore, the MSUAP will continue to be a partnership between MSU, Ingham County Board of Commissioners, and Ingham County Juvenile Court, thus maintaining its collaborative approach. The MSUAP began on a foundation of evidence based practices and solid research indicating its success, which is outlined in the sections below. The MSUAP continues such research through a systems assessment on individual and contextual risk and strength data on all incoming youth. This assessment serves as an important component for court decision making, resource allocation, and intervention design decisions. The program also continually applies for additional funding through grants and awards to ensure the MSUAP is able to continue impacting students, youth, and their families at a community and systems level.

Impacts of the MSUAP Model

Impact on Students

Over the years, a number of longitudinal experiments have been conducted on the efficacy of the MSUAP in terms of impact on youth and the impact on the participating students. A summarization of the results of the different studies is provided as a way of explaining the impact the MSUAP has had on participating students. Studies examined the relative impact of various training and supervision approaches of undergraduate students to determine which would have the greatest effect on the attitudes and behaviors of participating students.

The studies examined a variety of variables, including intensity of training, content of training, and approaches of supervision. Intensity of training was examined through frequency and size of training/supervision classes (Mitchell, Kantrowitz, & Davidson, 1980). Supervision and training, on the other hand, was examined through action focused, relationship focused, and natural skills focused trainings. Action focused training “consisted of theoretical rationales for practical applications of behavior and environmental conceptions of human behavior and delinquency” (Mitchell, Kantrowitz, & Davidson, 1980, p. 626). Relationship focused training focused on developing interpersonal skills and provided theoretical rationales concerning the necessity and quality of human relationships. Natural skills focused served as a type of control group because this strategy utilized the natural talents of the students, was not based on a specific theoretical rationale, and did not have a prescribed model of intervention. Each of these three experimental conditions has parallel training through mastery oriented manuals and intervention supervision. For experimentation purposes, these five factors were nested into two groups: the high intensity group involved action versus relationship conditions and the low intensity group involved small-group versus large-group conditions. Students were randomly assigned to training/supervision conditions and multiple measures before and after the two-semester course were administered.

The results indicated that students in the action and relationship conditions developed more positive feelings towards themselves, their capacity as change agents, and the juvenile justice system during their involvement in the program. Students in the other conditions (large, small, and control) developed more negative feelings throughout their involvement in the program (Mitchell, Kantrowitz, & Davidson, 1980). This study served as a means of impacting the ways in which trainings for volunteerism and service learning are thought about and executed. While changes in self-worth and self-image varied across the results of this study, these variations tell us something about what nonprofessionals need and desire to be successful and, ultimately, impacted by service learning experiences. Students placed in the high intensity, highly structured groups (action and relationship), developed more positive self-concept over time. While, students placed in the conditions that lacked intensity, structure, and supervision, experienced a decline in self-concept (Mitchell, Kantrowitz, & Davidson, 1980). To have a positive experience that involves growth, skill development, and changes

in attitude, students may need more structure, supervision, and teaching rather than being left to their own approaches or placed in traditional agency settings.

A second set of questions examined the impact of the MSUAP outreach/engagement learning experience on the more distal outcomes of the students. On two separate occasions, many more students wanted to gain access to the MSUAP than there was room for. As a result, randomized experimental and control groups were created and both groups were followed for two years, post-graduation. Both groups were interviewed two years later. The interview assessed the impact the outreach/engagement learning experience had on the time they spent volunteering and striving for employment positions in human service fields (McVeigh, Davidson, & Redner, 1984). Compared to students not admitted to the MSUAP, participating students were more likely to enter graduate school, to graduate with a higher grade-point average (excluding the grades received in the MSUAP courses), to gain employment in human services, and more highly value their undergraduate education (McVeigh et al., 1984; Mitchell, Davidson, Chodakowski, & McVeigh, 1985; Davidson et al., 1991).

More recently, qualitative studies have been completed to understand the experience of participating in the MSUAP. In the domain of student educational experience, students were interviewed to gain knowledge about the impact MSUAP had on their future endeavors. Students interviewed all indicated that MSUAP had a positive impact on their educational and personal growth (Jimenez et al., 2010). Students felt that MSUAP was a beneficial experience in that it helped them learn about themselves and the community in which they live. Due to the collaborative nature, students were given the ability to gain a greater understanding of the role social inequality plays in people's lives and the importance of looking through a lens of multiple diverse perspectives (Jimenez et al., 2010).

Impact on Youth and Families

Fast forward to today and you will see that MSUAP is structured to reflect its initial goals and remains a strengths-based program aimed at combating recidivism and providing university students with a service learning opportunity that educates about social systems and social justice. MSUAP remains a community-based program aimed at diverting youth away from

further involvement with the juvenile justice system through the utilization of student volunteers. The impact MSUAP has stretches across community and systems domains.

Community. In the domain of community, MSUAP has brought about a safer community through reduced recidivism rates and fiscal savings (Jimenez et al., 2010). In multiple longitudinal experiments involving nearly a thousand youth, those randomly assigned to MSUAP were half as likely to recidivate compared to those who participated in a control group of usual treatment or outright release (Davidson et al., 1976; Davidson et al., 1991; Smith, Wolf, Cantillon, & Davidson, 2004; Jimenez et al., 2010). Additionally, youth who participated in MSUAP had a school attendance rate of 63% after two years versus 26% for the control group. In terms of fiscal savings, MSUAP has been shown to save the community approximately \$5,000 per case and over the course of MSUAP's implementation within the community, the program has saved approximately \$24,000,000 (Jimenez et al., 2010).

System. In the domain of systems, MSUAP has had an impact by offering the court an additional dispositional option at the time of intake (Jimenez et al., 2010). Prior to MSUAP, the court had two options at intake, dismiss or place on probation. With the implementation of MSUAP, the court now had three dispositional options. To gather data that would speak to a systemic impact, a random sample of cases was selected for the years before and after the implementation of MSUAP. Variables such as demographics, school performance, criminal history, and extant crime were coded and statistical decision models were established for pre and post time periods (Jimenez et al., 2010). From this, two key findings emerged.

First, a large majority of youth who were referred to MSUAP were those who would have been placed on probation prior to the addition of MSUAP (Jimenez et al., 2010). This was an intended systemic effect; however, it was also discovered that a small number of cases referred to MSUAP would have been released prior to the implementation of the program. This consequence meant that some court decision makers included youth that the court would have otherwise released (Jimenez et al., 2010). Second, by probation cases being referred to MSUAP instead, the court now had more available resources to expend elsewhere in a more efficient manner (Jimenez et al., 2010). Based on this, goals of systemic impact were reached

as MSUAP relieved pressure on the juvenile court and diverted probation cases to a strengths-based program.

While it is possible to see the multiple impacts MSUAP has had on the lives of the youth and students who participate in the program through research and data, in depth case studies have also been accomplished recently to provide a richer understanding of the experience. The story of Diane and Sue (names have been changed to protect anonymity) shows just how long lasting the effects of participating in MSUAP are.

MSUAP Case Study

When Sue began her time in the MSUAP, she was just fourteen and a high school freshman. In an interview, Sue admitted that she was not one to care much about school and simply wanted to have fun (Michigan State University, 2017). When Sue was accused of shoplifting, she found her way into the Adolescent Program and was soon paired with her advocate, Diane. For both Diane and Sue, participating in the MSUAP created a life-long relationship that neither one expected (Michigan State University, 2017). Sue stated that when she first started the program, she was not interested in a job and definitely tested her advocate's boundaries. Diane continued to be there for Sue in ways that other people in her life hadn't been.

Through the intervention process, Diane worked with Sue one-on-one for six to eight hours a week for 18 weeks. During the first five weeks of the intervention, Diane assessed Sue's family, friends, school, interests/hobbies, identity, current life perception, fantasy of self, support systems, and coping ability. This assessment is a crucial part of the intervention process in that it helps the advocate, Diane, learn valuable information that helps form the remainder of the intervention. Based on Diane's assessment and Sue's identification of what she would like to improve upon, Diane helped Sue fill out job applications and talk through difficult family dynamics (Michigan State University, 2017). Once the program ended Diane began working for local social service agencies, earned her master's degree, and is now pursuing her PhD in Adult and Lifelong Education.

Sue, on the other hand, graduated from high school and is now working as a full-time employee at Community Mental Health helping youth in the

Lansing area in the same way that her advocate helped her (Michigan State University, 2017). Sue attributes her career path to the time Diane spent helping her develop and reach her goals and now passes on that same skill development to the kids she works with.

Conclusion

The story of Sue and Diane has been included as a way to illustrate the research findings through a real youth and advocate relationship. The bond Sue and Diane built, is one that is congruent with what research has found as far as impact on the youth and student. Research indicates that the MSUAP, as a collaborative outreach/engagement learning experience, impacts students by increasing their likelihood of entering graduate school, graduating with a higher grade-point average, gaining employment in human services, and increasing their likelihood of valuing their undergraduate education (McVeigh et al., 1984; Mitchell et al., 1985; Davidson et al., 1991). Diane experienced these impacts in her personal and academic life following her involvement in the MSUAP. As mentioned above, she is employed in a human service setting and has furthered her education through a master's degree and soon, a PhD.

For the youth who participate in the MSUAP, research suggests that they will have a reduced rate of recidivism and learn how to be self-sufficient so that he or she could learn how to become their own advocate and navigate social support systems independently (Davidson et al., 1977). This impact is illustrated through Sue's experience in that she graduated from high school and has learned to navigate social systems and advocate for herself. She pays this forward by being an advocate for youth in the community and teaches them the skills that Diane taught her.

Outreach and engagement has become a prominent component of the MSUAP experience, and therefore follows the principles of outreach and engagement. The MSUAP allows for community and university collaboration, goes beyond the typical "internship" experience, and involves university researcher and juvenile justice leaders collaborating to create a new setting that supports community action and research (Davidson, Petersen, & Winslow, 2010). Through the utilization of these principles, students experienced a positive impact on their feelings of self-concept and educational experience. Additionally, students who have been involved in

the MSUAP have been more likely to attend graduate school and work in human service jobs, as was the case for Diane. Through the MSUAP, students indicated that they were able to learn more about themselves and the community in which they live, which lead to positive personal growth. Students also were able to understand the role social inequality plays and the importance of multiple diverse perspectives (Jimenez et al., 2010).

The MSUAP also follows experiential learning principles and treats learning as a process by providing students with structured and intense supervision, which creates a safe space to learn through implementation of their teachings in a real setting. It also challenges the beliefs and values of its students by utilizing action and relationship focused trainings, which helped students develop more positive feelings towards themselves, their capacity as change agents, and the juvenile justice system (Mitchell, Kantrowitz, & Davidson, 1980). In addition to challenging beliefs, the MSUAP presents students with opposing views, creating conflicts within the students, which propels the learning process forward. Through various teaching modalities, the MSUAP challenges its students to consider differing views regarding the juvenile justice system and juvenile delinquency that vary from what the student may have originally thought. Lastly, the MSUAP is a learning experience that extends beyond the classroom by generating transactions that take place between the person and the environment (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Students work one on one with a youth and their family within the context of his or her environment so as to empower the youth to advocate for themselves and learn how to access services in their community. This has shown a reduction in recidivism and increase in school attendance for youth (Jimenez et al., 2010).

Results of various studies conducted about the MSUAP serve the purpose of affecting the development of future courses and educational experiences. It was learned that students had better outcomes when placed in the highly intense, structured, and supervised class. Students placed in classes that lacked the variables of intensity, structure, and supervision experienced a decline in self-concept and reported less satisfaction with their experience (Mitchell, Kantrowitz, & Davidson, 1980). This information has the ability to influence the way future volunteerism and service learning courses are taught by showing that nonprofessionals appear to do better in settings where they are properly trained and supervised. It appears that to have a successful and positive experience that involves skill development, growth,

and changes in attitude, students may need more structure, supervision, and teaching than what is utilized in traditional agency settings.

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