

Nuestra Escuela and the University of Puerto Rico; the Joint Quest for Responsive Schools for Dropouts and Students at Risk

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1. SESSION INFORMATION

Session Description:

Nuestra Escuela has been an effective model of university engagement with communities. University of Puerto Rico-Río Piedras Campus' professors and students, together with educational practitioners have jointly developed theory and strategies based on research and on reflections about practices with drop out students. These efforts have produced an effective community based program in which students' competences, self-esteem, family and peer relationships, and character are developed through a caring and engaged personnel working as a team. University professors and students put to the test theories and skills in an action research framework.

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The collaborative Project

One of Puerto Rico's main educational problems is the high rate of drop outs students in the public school system (42%). This percent has been steady for about forty years (Cao y Nazario, 1993; U.S.Census, 2000). In spite of the Department of Education's numerous initiatives to attend the problem it has persisted to the present. Our experience working in school related projects tell us that a new model to attend drop out students is needed. In order to develop this new model, one must be actively involved within the program setting to properly explore and understand it. Accordingly, a group of professors of the University of Puerto Rico-Río Piedras Campus initiated a collaborative inquiry, an action research, with a community based educational project to develop a model to attend drop out students, shifting its emphasis from control and deterrence to youth development. This project is being developed by **Nuestra Escuela, (Our School)**, a community-based, non-profit, non governmental corporation, which has been supported by a network of resources and collaboration of state and municipal governments agencies, community foundations, and private corporations and university institutions.

The joint collaboration of the university with this project and its support network demonstrates an effective model for the university to fulfill its mission of creating useful knowledge and in this way complying with it's civic engagement. It also shows that the university learns in this collaborative process and through this learning improves its capability to develop useful knowledge. This way it can help explain effectively the root factors of a social problem, and serve as basis for the design of policies and collective intervention that will effectively solve or ameliorate the problem.

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This project also shows the need of action research in order to design appropriate and effective alternatives of social action. However in order for action research to be effective, it has to be inserted in joint collaborative processes of action and reflection, along the lines of the reflective practitioner model of Donald A. Schon and the integration of ordinary knowledge and professional social inquiry proposed by David K. Cohen and C. Lindbloom.

This collaborative project has developed a proven model for improving school retention and effectiveness which recently has been recognized by our new governor and public education officials as an effective alternative school program to increase retention through strategies focused on youth development. The Governor, whose policy includes among its top three priorities to reduce the number of school dropouts, decided, after a visit of high ranking education officials, including the aid of the Governor in the area of education to Nuestra Escuela, to use it as a model to assist the public schools in the Caguas region in reducing dropouts. For us this constitutes an official and public recognition of the effectiveness of the school model developed jointly between the University and the community and private organizations. In this paper we share our views of the processes involved in this collaboration of the University with the state and city agencies and the community. This collaboration has produced an effective model for improving school retention and raising the level of learning of students that have been “left behind” and are at high risk of failure and eventually leaving school.

The process

The project has involved on the one hand, the director and administrative staff of Nuestra Escuela, its eight teachers of the required standard courses for the high school diploma, the social workers, psychologists and counselors of the Student Support Unit, and a professional community oriented psychiatrist who serves as advisor to the project.

On the other hand, the University of Puerto Rico – Rio Piedras Campus Professors in the disciplines related to the curriculum courses; Mathematics, Science, History and Social Studies, Spanish and English who served as curriculum advisors, a professor in educational planning and evaluation and graduate students in psychology and education. University students, both graduate and undergraduate, have been participants as aids and assistants to teachers, psychologists, counselors, and social workers and as

researchers for program evaluation. They also have been actively involved in the process of redefining current conceptions of educational problems and designing and putting new educational strategies to the test. These students research assistants have made presentations in conferences of the Faculty of Education, jointly with the professors who coordinate the project.

University's professors usually think of the impact of their research to practice in a rational linear model. The knowledge and facts generated by systematic social research framed in the scientific model of inquiry, will serve as an authoritative base for decisions that will improve policy and practice, and lead to solution of problems. This view missed the fact of the complex and open character of social systems, which cannot be fully apprehended through independent and external observation. These social systems are open to contingencies, surprises, and are highly interdependent with the environment. Usually the external observer will approach reality with pre conceptions, often grounded in established research findings, that will guide one's vision toward determined aspects of the reality that are considered significant or relevant.

In this project, the drops out students' participants in the project are both beneficiaries and the subjects of the research. They have an active role in the design and evaluation of the project through meetings, focus group discussions and personal interviews in which they give their views and opinions on the curriculum, teaching methods and the overall functioning of the project. The practitioners; administrators, teachers and psychologists who provide the services are also actors in the research process.

The cycle of action –reflection usually starts with a discussion of alternatives designed by the university professors based on research literature. The teachers, and other personnel, discussed the alternatives. From the discussion a Revised Version of the alternative is developed. This version is tried out in practice and the teachers bring forth their observations about their experience. A joint reflection of the university professors and the project's staff on the processes and results of the strategies essayed has led to reviews of the initial underlying theories that framed the teaching and curricular approaches and the role played by the socio emotional factors. This in turn has served as the basis for changes in the model as well as the design of new alternatives, and the

theoretical frameworks of educational and learning processes. This action-reflection cycle has been maintained as a continuous process in the development of the program.

The involvement of the university professors and students took place in four areas; curriculum development, evaluation research, policy decisions and planning, and organization development. These efforts were carried out together with the staff of Nuestra Escuela at the design, evaluation and decision-making levels.

In the curriculum development area, the professors' specialists in the subject matter designed course content in direct consultation with the teachers who provided inputs at the design stage and above all, they test the material in class and their evaluation is a critical input for the final product. The end result has been the development of a curriculum that is relevant to students' personal development, interests and level of proficiency.

In addition, two university students, under the direction of a professor of social planning and evaluation carried out an evaluation study through focus groups interviews with the students. The students were free to express their opinions and feelings about the course curriculum and the classes. These opinions and perceptions are to be discussed with the teachers, curriculum specialists and the support staff. In this next cycle the information gathered will serve as critical inputs for the revision of the courses and teaching strategies.

In the policy area, the university professors coordinators (authors of this presentation) are members of the program evaluation and policy team of the project, together with the executive director, the coordinators of the academic and of the student support units, and the representative of the municipality of Caguas mayor, a community oriented psychiatrist who has served as an ad honorem consultant in the psychological and counseling services area of the project. The president of the Board of Directors, a former executive of a major bank institution which has lent financial and expertise support to the project and is now the head of small firm, participates occasionally in the meetings.

In our view the process in this team epitomizes the concept of the relation of the university with the community it serves. This team which serves as a steering committee of the project meets periodically to reflect on the development of the project taking into

account the experiences and information reported by the coordinators and the director and the two university professors who are involved in the curriculum and evaluation areas. The joint reflection on the workings of the project has brought into interaction on one hand the knowledge derived from the academic expertise based on scientific studies of the specialized disciplines, and on the other, the knowledge of the reflective practitioners.

For the university professors, this joint reflection has been a critical process that has framed the theoretical model for the development of the project. Likewise it has contributed to revise their paradigms on learning and teaching, on curricular principles, the understanding of violence, in its physical and emotional modes, as a pervasive condition that arrests youth lives and in particular their capacity and willingness for learning, and the organizational dynamics of a services provider and its interaction with the community at large. (The results of this process will be discussed in the next section).

The point to be underlined is that the civic engagement of the university is not to be understood as an authoritative services provider which undertakes this mission under the mantle of the assumption that it bears the expertise based on scientific or other forms of authoritative knowledge. This is only part of a dual interaction of academic and practitioners' knowledge, as well as the knowledge of clients and concerned communities. The engagement has to be collaborative in its organizational form, value processing, cognitive inquiry and social action, with a learning perspective. Academic knowledge will either be validated or revised, and in both cases will be enriched and strengthened. Both the community and the university will stand to gain from this collaborative process, for as the often cited quote of Erich Fromm states; " In times of change, learners inherit the earth."

The product

In this presentation we have focused on the processes involved in a collaborative model of university civic engagement that asserts the primary mission of a university as creator of useful knowledge. To attain this it must address the issues as a learner together with practitioners and the community. Accordingly, we university professors did learn many significant lessons in this project which have led to the revision of firmly held beliefs supported by the academic literature. The lessons learned have gradually weaved

into the redesign of an effective educational model for drop outs and students at risk framed by the paradigm of youth development.

In essence this model is characterized by the following principles;

-The curriculum and teaching strategies are “personalized”; that is, they are directed to students’ needs, interests and levels of proficiency of the subject matter, and student’s learning styles and pace.

-These students have a history of physical and / or emotional abuse which have profound emotional scars that affect their self- esteem, learning and general behavior in school, and in many cases lead to delinquency. Therefore attention to their socio emotional is a critical and indispensable requirement to enable youth to adjust to lifestyles and discipline required for studying and learning.

-The attention to their overcoming their socio emotional conflicts must be all encompassing in that classes, curriculum and all other interactions of institutional life in school and relations with family and community are directed toward this goal. Thus, teachers and other support and administrative staff, including security and maintenance personnel are trained to enable them to relate and interact with sensibility and understanding.

-In this sense, psychologists social workers and other human services staff do not function under the clinical model of individual consultation and counseling, but are mostly focused in creating an environment of harmony supportive of the young’s personal development as a student-learner, affectionate and responsible member of a family, respectful of his/her spouse or partner, responsible citizen in his community and productive employee or entrepreneur.

-The organizational structure and management styles that will enable continuous learning with the effective interaction and coordinated action of the different educational and support components have to be founded on internal team building, collective decision making and external networking with community organizations, public sector agencies, and business firms.

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