Reaching Beyond the Choir: Taking Experiential Education Down From The Mountain and Into The Public School

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For the past six years, the Discovery Program at Prospect Heights Middle School in Orange, Virginia has implemented the tenets of Outward Bound's and John Dewey's experiential education philosophies as pedagogy for addressing state-mandated academic subject matter. The Discovery Program exists within a traditional public school as an autonomous “school-within-a-school” and serves a heterogeneous student population. The purpose of this research on the Discovery Program is to investigate the effectiveness of applying experiential education philosophy within the context of a public school system that is increasingly focused on high-stakes test scores per local, state, and now federal (with Leave No Child Left Behind) directives.

Within the context of a traditional public school system, many educators view experiential education as a philosophy more suited to the mountains or woods—not as an everyday strategy in their classrooms. Likewise, many experiential educators view the public school system as too constricted, inflexible, and scripted—not as a conducive environment for their philosophies. This dilemma is exasperated by a lack of research on the effectiveness of experiential education in addressing the mandated curricula that appear on high-stakes tests. Further, while many in the experiential education field (participants and practitioners) believe that it works on some general level, research needs to clearly describe what works and why in order to determine the viability of its use in the public school system. Because Virginia has been at the forefront of the high-stakes testing movement, it is an ideal location to investigate this viability.

In addition to the Standards of Learning (Virginia's K-12 curriculum guide for the core academic subjects), the state's General Assembly recently mandated all school districts to develop and implement an accountable character education program (VA Senate Bill 817, 2000). Thus, educators in Virginia are now required by law to use an outcome-based character education program that will address objectives such as: responsibility, honestly, and compassion. Many districts have sought to minimize teachers' distraction from the Standards of Learning by separating content education from this newly required character education. Unfortunately, in purchasing “teacher-proof” character education kits, these districts are seeking to further de-contextualize the process of teaching and learning instead of integrating the two mandated curricula within a context where character and content can be experienced.

Research on the Discovery Program, however, provides an opportunity to examine how these mandated curricula can be integrated within a context where character and content can be experienced. Using both qualitative and quantitative data collected over the past six years, our research demonstrates that the tenets of experiential education philosophy can be effective in providing a bridge between the perceived domain of experiential education—the mountains or woods—and the perceived confines of public school—four walls and a chalkboard. Moreover, the Discovery Program's emphasis on the whole student's growth and development suggests a transferable model of effectively integrating the mandated character education and content education curricula of Virginia. While the test scores of Discovery students have vastly outpaced the scores of comparison peer groups (within the host school, district, and state), perhaps the more important "scores" have been the triangulated evidence suggesting that Discovery students have improved perceptions of behavior ownership, community involvement, and personal efficacy. As dramatic as our findings are, our research suggests that experiential education, while no panacea for all that ails the public school system, is a viable approach amidst institutional moves toward a more pedantic pedagogy.

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