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A Successful Strategy for Initiating Hispanic 4-H Clubs

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Abstract: In 2004, a pilot summer literacy program gave Hispanic students the opportunity to improve their English reading and writing skills in a non-threatening and creative environment. The program included service-learning projects and interaction with local veterans. By the end of the summer, the group had evolved into the first Hispanic 4-H club in South Carolina. It was still active nearly 4 years later. Several students from the original program have been involved in organizing the 2007 offering of the now-annual summer literacy program. Such a program can be replicated in any location where there is a willing and creative core of planners and supporters.

Introduction

Because 4-H is a component of land-grant universities, and an important aspect of youth outreach is to encourage and help students advance to higher education. Hispanics are under-represented in higher education; thus, we selected an Hispanic community near our university to help them focus on higher education goals (Sorensen, Brewer, Carroll, & Bryton, 1995). We discussed this initiative with teachers and counselors from a middle school that has a significant Hispanic student population (13%). They emphasized that higher education will be limited to very few Hispanic students unless they can improve their English literacy skills. In response to this, a committee was formed in the spring of 2004 to organize and implement a pilot Hispanic summer literacy program that would include service-learning projects.

Purpose of the Literacy Program

The purposes of the literacy program were as follows:

1. To create an enjoyable and non-threatening environment for Hispanic middle school students to improve their English reading and writing skills during the summer vacation break.
2. To engage the students in service projects and form linkages with various community organizations. Projects with local veterans were included to fulfill the requirements of a Learn and Serve America grant.

3. To use a creative and engaging summer activity to initiate an Hispanic 4-H club. Before this club was formed, there were no known members of Hispanic origin in any of the 4-H clubs in South Carolina.

Persons Involved

The core group of people involved in this project included a middle school math teacher, the county Extension 4-H agent, the school district English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) coordinator, the middle school ESOL instructor, a university professor specializing in literacy, and a community volunteer. These people were identified through the author's own familiarity with the community and by asking respected contacts for recommendations of candidates to invite to serve on the core committee. Other volunteers who were engaged as needed were several veterans, a church youth minister, Clemson University Master Gardeners, a reporter from the regional Hispanic newspaper, and the assistant soccer coach from Clemson University. Our core planning committee met four times in the spring prior to the summer program to share ideas, agree on activities, and establish the schedule.

Implementation

Two weeks before starting the program, we met with interested parents one evening at the middle school to explain the program schedule and activities. The parents were notified of this meeting through the cooperation of the ESOL teacher and counselors at the middle school. Because we wanted to limit the program to approximately 25 students, the parents signed a form, written in Spanish, indicating their level of commitment to the program with regard to their children's attendance and how they perceived the program with respect to importance for their children. Only the students whose parents indicated the highest level of commitment to the program were invited to participate. Because we had parents and their children together at the meeting, a staff member from the local library also assisted the students in applying for a library card.

Summer Schedule

The program met every Tuesday and Thursday from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. during June and July in the activity room of the city public library. Walhalla is a small town, and the library is close to where most students lived. The majority of the students arrived by walking or on bicycle, which was convenient because most parents were working during those hours. We would break for mid-afternoon snacks and physical recreation at the county Extension office, which is one block away. Our basic daily schedule was:

- 2:00 to 2:15: Welcome, sign in
- 2:15 to 2:45: Read aloud
- 2:50 to 3:40: Large group activity
- 3:40 to 4:00: Break/snack
- 4:00 to 4:40: Small groups
- 4:40 to 5:00: Journal, reflection, clean-up

By having the breaks at the county Extension office and including the 4-H pledge every day, we were able to subtly expose the participants to 4-H. A few of the students dropped out of the program due to family vacations, but there was no problem keeping full attendance. As the friends and relatives of those attending the program heard about it, they would come to the activities, asking to join.

Some Example Activities

The following ideas stemmed from the expertise and experiences of a diverse committee as a result of our brainstorming sessions.

1. The students used personal journals to write reports about books they had read at home (title, author, and story summary). They also wrote personal reflections about topics such as "Where I Would Like to Travel in the World, and "Who Is My Most Influential Person."
2. As students reported to us the number of pages they had read at home since the previous meeting, the page numbers were converted to miles on a large map of the North American continent. We would "travel" to various locations of their choosing and, after arriving, have a simple celebration reflecting some theme from that location. An example would be a party with Disney-decorated plates and cups after arriving at Orlando, Florida, or a beach theme party after we had arrived in Southern California.
3. Master Gardeners showed the students how to re-pot African violets, which the students watered every time that we met. Later in the summer, the students presented the plants as gifts to residents of a nursing home. The students read books, which they had previously practiced reading, to the residents during the visit.
4. The students were given a library tour, and subsequently the students were engaged in a book scavenger hunt to find specific books, i.e., use the title and author to find the call number and then find the book.
5. Students practiced reading books from lower grade levels until they could read them without error, and, afterwards, they made their own books-on-tape for elementary children to be left with the library.
6. A university professor offered a "THIEVES study strategy workshop" to train students how to read textbook material and retain the information (Manz, 2002). This skill was practiced and reinforced several times after the workshop.
7. A veteran gave the students a hands-on flag etiquette-training workshop. Most, if not all of the students, had never previously handled a full-size American flag.
8. A presentation by personnel from Clemson University exposed the students to careers in the health professions.
9. A reporter from the regional Hispanic newspaper gave the students a mini-workshop about how to conduct an interview, and then, immediately afterwards, eight veterans came to be interviewed by the students in small groups regarding their war experiences. The interviews were recorded with hand-held recorders, and the highlights were later transcribed by the students to written form.

10. The students worked in teams to write script outlines for a series of movie clips to be shown at the orientation for new in-coming middle school 6th grade students and their parents. The overall theme was "Appropriate Behavior for Middle School." After writing the scripts, the students spent 1 day in the vacant school where they filmed their "skits" at various locations. Subsequently, they went to Clemson University on three occasions to learn digital video editing techniques and then edited their videos at the Media Center of the Education Department. The individual segments were fused into one continuous video in DVD format and given to the administrators responsible for new, incoming 6th grader orientation.
11. Students attended an end-of-summer soccer camp hosted by the Clemson University varsity assistant soccer coach at Clemson University.

Discussion

When the new school year started, fall 2004, the summer activity had evolved into a middle school 4-H club that began meeting after school at the County Extension office twice a month. The club elected officers and has completed many service projects, the first being a fund-raising activity to send money to an orphanage in Mexico. The members prepared a poster of their experience with the summer literacy program that won second place at the Upstate County Fair. In the summer of 2004, two of the club members attended the State 4-H Congress, the first time that Hispanic 4-H members had ever attended such an event.

Experience has shown that the local schools offer a viable avenue through which to start Hispanic outreach programs. The schools are a trusted institution among the Hispanic families, and, if a program is introduced through a school, the parents are much more likely to allow their children to attend by the positive association.

A program similar to this one can be replicated in any location where there is a willing and creative core of planners as well as support from local agencies such as the county Extension office and the local schools. The requirement of a few, simple materials for many of the projects makes cost a minor limitation.

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