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College Student Affection Issues in Child and Family Focused Community Service-learning Settings

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Abstract

This article offers an examination of the ways in which college students manage and cope with client displays of physical or emotional affection toward them during their work in child-or family-related service learning placements. This paper also offers suggestions for assisting college students who may encounter displays of affection during their work with children. In order to explore this topic, a convenience sample of 77 college student service learning journals were collected and content-analyzed for common or recurrent themes across the journals. Analyses of the journals revealed that both men and women struggle to find appropriate responses to client affection.

* * *

R. was kissing me again. This has me confused, because it does not seem very common for a six-year-old [boy] to go around kissing people on the lips. (Service-learning student, female, participant #28)

Service-learning, interning, and volunteering can be very worthwhile and rewarding experiences for college students. Service-learning is defined as a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized activity that contributes to the meeting of a community's needs (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). What distinguishes service-learning from other forms of experiential learning is the emphasis that is placed on structured and regular written and/or verbal processing regarding service-learning experiences, insights, connections to course content, and/or personal growth (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Dunlap, 1997; Goldsmith, 1993; Sigmon, 1994). Working in real life settings affords service-learners the opportunity to learn about the physical, cognitive and psychosocial growth and development of humans in an active and participatory way. Service-learning and other forms of experiential learning provide opportunities for students to not only learn about other human beings in their community environments, but also it is an opportunity for students to learn from others who have a wealth of knowledge, information, and competencies in their own right to share (Coles, 1993; Dunlap, 1998a).

As new service-learners adapt to their service-learning placement, they detail in their critical reflection journals some of their emotions and experiences. Written reactions to service-learning issues are key components of the service-learning process wherein articulating their reactions provides opportunities for students to define, articulate, and move forward in their thinking regarding their service-learning experiences (Goldsmith, 1993; Sigmon, 1994).

One issue that is frequently discussed in service-learner journals involves students' questioning and considering how they should interact with child clients¹ who seek or express physical or emotional affection. In these circumstances, service learners may have trouble trying to assess the appropriateness of the affectionate behavior itself, and the appropriate responses to it. For example, if a client hugs them, they may worry how others are perceiving the child's demonstration of affection toward them. They may wonder if it is appropriate for them to return the hug. They also may consider whether

such affection could be interpreted or misinterpreted as an action that inappropriately puts the child at risk.

Therefore, incidents occur requiring students to decide how to interact with, and respond to, an affectionate child who is engaging in physical or emotional affection such as hugging, holding hands, clinging, or declaring their love for the service-learner.

B. lied down in my lap and paid close attention. It become awkward for me because he had never showed so much affection, and I let him lie against my arm, but it made me feel a little weird. (female, participant #79)

One comment that I got the first day, however, startled me a little. As I was leaving, a little girl came up to me and asked me if I could come home with her and be her "Daddy." I didn't know how to react to that, and didn't want to make any promises that I couldn't keep, so I just smiled at her and didn't say anything. (male, participant #73)

Drawing on the definitions of Botkin & Twardosz (1988, p. 167), "affection" is defined for the purpose of this paper as, close, personal feelings expressed emotionally or physically from one person to another. Inevitably, as is the case with anyone who spends significant time with someone, the service-learner often becomes important in the schema of the child's life. The affection of the child toward the service learner can begin as soon as the service-learner's first trip to the placement. In order to gain a preliminary assessment of the prevalence and nature of how the question of emotional and physical affection is played out in service-learning settings, 77 college student journals collected over the course of a semester were content-analyzed with regard to the issue of the display of affection by child clients.

Setting the Context

The participants were 77 Spring 1996 Introduction to Child Development: Social World of the Child course students who at the end of the semester submitted their service-learning journals and gave written permission for their journal to be included in studies of college student adjustment in service-learning. In the written informed consent, students were assured that their entries would be encoded, analyzed, and discussed anonymously, and that their course grade would not be affected by their participation, or lack of participation, in accordance with the guidelines and approval of the Connecticut College Human Subjects Institutional Review Board and the Connecticut College Psychology Department Ethics Committee. Nearly all of the students submitted their journals for inclusion.

The participants who submitted journals for the study had engaged in service-learning over the course of 14-16 weeks, for approximately 2-4 hours per week, prior to submitting their journals into the study (Dunlap, 1998b). Their service-learning environments were self-selected from numerous community possibilities including the Connecticut College Children's Program, off-campus preschool environments, after-school tutoring programs, soup kitchens, and community homeless shelters. Sixty-four percent (n=49) of the journals were from freshman course students, while the other 36% (n=28) were from students in sophomore and junior level courses. The participants were undergraduates with the majority being: freshmen (n=49 or 64%); 17-21 years of age (n=72 or 94%), female (n=64 or 83%) and of European American background (n=69 or 90%).

AEQ *raises awareness of new teaching methods!*

Journal Analyses

The 77 journals were transformed into anonymous data sets, and were systematically analyzed using the "topical codes 2" method of content-analysis outlined in Bernard (1994, p. 197; see also Dunlap, 1997, 1998c, & in press; Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994). The Topical Codes method requires the coding of each passage of journal entry for the designated thematic codes that match the passage content. The data were cross-checked among data coders, and discrepant codes were discussed by the research team and agreed upon. Thus, journal data were marked and coded when any instances were reported where the service-learner was confronted with an incident involving emotional or physical affection by a child client. The data codes were tabulated in a number of ways. For one, after a "situation" was explicitly noted by a service-learner in his/her journal, the entries that contained instances of affection toward service learners were additionally coded either as: "stressing," "amusing," "non-emotive" or "other," depending upon the emotional tone offered by the writer of the journal.

Entries were coded as "stressing" when the service learner described the situation as stressful, unexpected, or leaving the service learner in a quandary as to what to do. For example, as one service learner writes:

As I was leaving K. came up to me and told me he loved me. This was not the first time, and it made me feel very uncomfortable, as well as unsure of what to say in response. I just smiled and pretended as if nothing happened. (male, participant #12)

Entries which were coded for their "amused" tone, included those that had statements such as "it was cute," "it was funny," or "it made me smile." For example:

There was also a boy M., the one from the last time that I worked with a lot, who told me "I was good enough to be his girlfriend." By the end of the day I was his "sweetheart" and he "loved me." It was so cute". (female, participant # 77)

The kids in today's session were very "touchy-feely". We had them sit down in a circle with us. The second we did this, two or three of them jumped into our laps. This was a great ego boost. They were immediately very comfortable with us which was also very nice. (male, participant #30)

Finally the category of "non-emotive" included written responses that mention the instance of affection, but had no written emotional reaction. For example:

[The other children] call him [a boy child] my boyfriend because he seems to like me so much. (female, participant #69)

It was not easy to get the kids to fall asleep. The teachers and myself would rub the backs of the children until they fell asleep. (male, participant #2)

Results

Analyses of the 77 journals revealed a number of interesting findings. Twenty-six or 34% of the 77 participants presented material in their journals concerning affection with child clients, indicating that at least one of every three of these service-learners were faced with this issue at one time or another.

Quality of Responses to Client Affection

The majority of participants who discussed affectionate episodes in their journals portrayed them as stressful (11/26 or 42%). Others gave non-emotive (matter of fact), and amused interpretations (9/26 or 35% and 6/26 or 23%, respectively). These analyses indicate that stress is the predominant reaction reported for those students who

see the episodes of affection as significant enough to warrant recounting them in their journals.

*Preliminary Analyses of Gender Differences
in Quality of Responses to Client Affection*

There were a number of differences found with respect to service-learner gender. However, when comparing gender differences in the type of reports made in the students' journals, the results must be interpreted very cautiously because of the imbalance in the number of male and female participants (i.e., 13 men vs. 64 women) due to course enrollment trends at the time. Referring to Table 1, of the 64 women who participated in the study, 21 (or 33%) of them offered unsolicited descriptions of episodes concerning affection from clients. Of the 13 men who participated in this study, five (or 38%) of them made unsolicited descriptions of episodes of affection from clients. So the rate of recounting such episodes seem almost identical for men and women, with men reporting at a slightly higher rate.

Table 1
Reactions to Client Affection by Gender of Service Learners

Reactions	Women (n=64)	Men (n=13)
Affection	21/64 (33%)	5/13 (38%)
Stress	8/21 (38%)	3/5 (60%)
Non-emotive	7/21 (33%)	2/5 (40%)
Amused	6/21 (29%)	0/5 (0%)

Still referring to Table 1, women who reported affectionate episodes tended to report them most frequently as stressful, non-emotive, and amusing, in that order. The men who reported affectionate episodes also tended to report them as stressful and non-emotive, in that order, with none describing the incidents as amusing.

Gender Differences in Cross-Sex and Same-Sex Responses

Referring to Table 2, the majority of the participants who reported affection-related incidents referred to cross-sex episodes involving individual children, meaning that the child whom they were discussing was of the opposite sex. Others offered same-sex and mixed-sex episodes.

Table 2
Cross-Sex and Same-Sex Responses

Situational Context	Women (n=21)	Men (n=5)
Cross-Sex Dyad	8/21 (38%)	2/5 (40%)
Same-Sex Dyad	5/21 (24%)	3/5 (60%)
Mixed-Sex Group	8/21 (38%)	0/5 (0%)

Still referring to Table 2, women in the presence of female clients, and men in the presence of groups of clients generated the lowest rates of discussion among those who

presented issues concerning affection in their journals. While oppositely, women in the presence of boys and mixed groups, and men in the presence of affectionate boys generated the highest rates of discussion in journals. This could mean that women were more likely to feel overwhelmed by larger groups of children seeking affection than were men. Tentatively the results also may suggest that men may be just as likely to be uncomfortable in the company of an affectionate male child as women appear to be.

Again, comparisons of service-learner gender differences in the tendency to report such episodes must be considered carefully because of the imbalance in the number of men and women in the participant pool. However, these results may illustrate response pressures that service-learners feel as a consequence of growing up in a heterosexist society that does not encourage men or women to accept affection from, nor to be appropriately affectionate toward, boys.

Differences by Course Level

It is also significant to note that out of the 49 freshman level course students, 21 of them or 43%, mentioned instances of affection in their reflection journals. In contrast, only four or 14% of the sophomore and junior level courses students mentioned episodes of affection in their journals. This suggests that the tendency to feel that one is appropriately handling issues of affection may regress and then progress over time as students mature and gain more experience with children. Most of the upper level students had already declared majors in Child Development, and had considerable experience with children relative to the freshmen, which could in part, account for the large dip in the documenting of affection concerns among upper-level course students.

Discussion

Student critical reflection journals reveal a great deal about the service learning process, the common and uncommon incidents that may occur, and the variety of perceptions and concerns that students have regarding those incidents. Analyses of student journals provide opportunities to explore, from the experiential learners' perspective, the psychological risks, costs, benefits, and response styles that exist regarding specific issues. Such analyses of student journals are useful as an assessment tool for determining the prevalence of particular student service-learner issues, reactions, and resources. When service-learners bring issues to facilitators of the service-learning process, facilitators can be assisted in their assessment of the normalcy of the issue or concern with the help of data derived from systematic analyses of previous service-learner journals. Facilitators can compare current or individual student issues and responses to qualitative and quantitative data derived from previous students in order to assess the typicality or uniqueness of the events, and offer appropriate re-framing, redirection, advising, support, and resources.

Thus, when service-learners express distress over child comments, physical behavior, etc., facilitators of the service-learning process first can evaluate individual situations against previous service-learners' experiences. They then can offer specific feedback to the service-learner regarding the frequency of such experiences in service-learning, and suggest appropriate ideas for intervention (e.g., ignoring the child behavior, redirecting the child's behavior, etc.). Facilitators of service-learning in settings that are not child-oriented, also may be able to use this information to determine appropriate responses and channels of support for service-learners who may be struggling with issues of affection with older adolescent and adult clients.

The fact that analyses of service-learner journals revealed that than one-third of all of the participants in this study discussed issues concerning child affection suggests that

this may be a major issue for service-learners, particularly for those working with children. The fact that 1 out of every 3 service-learners actually articulated their concerns regarding such affection may indicate that there may be others who have struggled with these same or similar issues, but did not share their concern in their journals. Such information can now be of practical use in that it may serve as a comfort to service-learners who can know that the occurrence of particular kinds of incidents of affection, and the variety of emotions that may accompany them, may be a normal part of the service-learning process. This kind of information may be useful to service-learners in general, but perhaps even more so for younger, less experienced students, and students newer to the service-learning, internship, or volunteering processes.

More importantly, it is crucial for service-learners, facilitators of service-learning, and agency supervising personnel to address, early on, the issue of appropriate affectionate behavior for both the protection of children and the protection of the service-learners. Service-learners need to clearly understand, up front, appropriate guidelines, expectations, and limits regarding emotional and physical affection with child clients, appropriate for their particular service-learning placement environment. Some environments may have a formal or informal keep-hands-off at all times policy, while other environments may include the showing of physical affection as appropriate or even as an expectation. If showing affection is permitted, it may be helpful for students to understand that early on, and to understand the boundaries and limits that keep them within the appropriate affection boundaries. Addressing such issues early on may serve as a relief to college students who seem to experience a great deal of anxiety about affection because of their desire to be appropriate at all times in their responses to children.

Do Your Students Have the Blahs?

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<<http://www.hmco.com/college/success/teachers/downing/>>.

Future studies of college student journals should include a larger and more diverse set that is more balanced gender-wise and ethnically, and with more diversity in terms of age and educational level. It would also be important to include a study of client journals and responses to service-learners in order to assess the affection-related issues that arise for clients as they engage in interaction with students.

Current and future studies of this nature will collectively contribute to the improving of the service-learning, internship, and volunteering processes, making them more comfortable, more productive, more effective, and more clearly understood for everyone involved. It also will enable service-learners to do a better job not only in serving clients, but also in learning mutually from the clients with whom they are engaged.

Note

¹ The term "client" is traditionally defined as "a person receiving the benefits or services of a social or government agency" (Steinmetz & Braham, 1996, p. 82). For the purpose of this paper, the term "client" again is defined as a person receiving the benefits or services of a social or government agency. However, in addition, a client and service-learner, by their very presence with each other, are in some degree of community *partnership*, and as such, are engaged in tasks that are assumed to be beneficial to both of them (Dunlap, 1998a).

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