Abstract

The ABEL Experience: A Lived Curriculum

This study examines the phenomena of lived experiences of students in an experiential-credit course taught at Sir John A. Macdonald High School. I believe ABEL (Adventure Based Experiential Learning) is an innovation, created from the benefits of a traditional educational experience, that can provide a new image of learning, leading and teaching. ABEL’s curricular foundation is experiential education that includes adventure education, outdoor education and service learning that became the impetus for a new youth leadership course. The intent of the course was to develop youth leadership through experiential learning. However, the power of experiential education was further revealed by the service learning projects.

ABEL has confirmed the thought in many youth that they can become leaders and that they do have the ability to make a difference by serving. It is the power of this service learning experience that has brought this study to focus on the students, and the researcher’s own experiences in serving and learning. Therefore, the purpose of this collaborative reflection was to examine ABEL, as an authentic and pedagogic form of empowerment for students. An in-depth understanding of the educational experiences of ABEL is possible by an examination of this shared phenomenon between myself as a teacher and my students.

Thus, what follows here is the telling of an educational adventure, a restorying, that will provide insights and a direction for ongoing experiential practice. Insights into the experiences of the students should provide experiential/service learning educators with an opportunity to examine a rich educational interpretation of how an ‘ABEL type’ course can best serve students. I believe ABEL is an example in which service learning is not the
program add-on but is a method of instruction founded in sound experiential and curricular practice. The curricular direction for the ABEL course is the development of youth leadership through initiative challenges, wilderness experiences and community partnerships. There is a need in educational research to understand the power of learning moments that our students and educators experience.

These learning moments were powerful and yet, to a large degree, not fully understood by me or my students. To reveal the connections of what was learned, experienced and formed as knowledge, the adventures had to be relived, told and retold, to advance our understanding of experiential practice. We all have a need for story and it is through the telling of our experiences that we can put shape to our own practices. This thesis confirmed for me that curricular experiences must do more than textual-knowledge advancement; they must empower students to reach their full potential. If the purpose of curriculum is to enrich the school experiences of youth and adults in the educational system, perhaps this can best occur when others are encouraged to lead, and challenged to be more fully engaged with the world.