

Evaluation of North Carolina Outward Bound Educators Initiative

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Evaluation of North Carolina Outward Bound Educators Initiative Executive Summary

The North Carolina Outward Bound School's Educators Initiative is designed to provide educators with opportunities to develop specific classroom practices based on the philosophies of experiential education. Experiential education encourages individuals to reflect on their experiences with a view to addressing problems in their lives and in the wider world, rather than focusing on the transmission of knowledge. The educational methodology is most simply described as a cycle of action and reflection, in which individuals act upon their world and then critically reflect upon the new learning, ready to reform future actions. The role of the educator in experiential education is that of facilitator. The educator offers students appropriate, challenging experiences and facilitates a process of reflection in which all participants draw lessons. Eventually, it is expected that students will be able to facilitate their own learning and growth in order to act upon their world to make positive change.

Goals of the Educators Initiative teacher professional development program included providing the resources and training for teachers to gain a deeper understanding of experiential education methodology by immersing them in transformational experiences that positively affect teaching practices. Particular emphasis was given to increasing teachers' skill-based knowledge of experiential education pedagogy in order to affect student learning and contribute to teacher satisfaction and retention. The design of the Educators Initiative follows recognized best practices for teacher professional development, described as "helping teachers not only learn new skills but also develop new insights into pedagogy and their own practice, and explore new or advanced understanding of content and resources" (Troen & Boles, 2003, p. 53). In addition, quality professional development is experiential for participants and is based in inquiry by teachers. Rather than outside experts doing the telling, teachers do the talking, thinking, and learning. Talking together in "critical and thoughtful conversations, teachers develop and refine ways to study teaching and learning" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1042).

In response to a request from the North Carolina Outward Bound School, a research team from Evaluation, Assessment, and Policy Connections (EvAP) in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill conducted a study to assess the extent to which NCOBS Educators Initiative met project goals of increasing teachers' knowledge and experience of experiential education. Twenty-three teachers from four public and independent schools participated in the Educators Initiative as Kurt Hahn Fellows, beginning in spring 2007 and continuing through spring 2008. The components of the Educators Initiative included pre-wilderness course preparation and training meetings in spring 2007 which included teacher self-assessment and goal setting; two eight-day wilderness courses in summer 2007 comprised of 12 teachers representing cohorts from two participating schools; ongoing mentoring/coaching calls, crew meetings, portfolio

reflections and monthly readings to support ongoing skill-building and confidence in experiential education; and two retreats in fall 2007 and spring 2008. Data were collected regarding each component of the teachers' experience and included surveys, interviews, analysis of written documents, and observations during retreats.

Impact of the North Carolina Outward Bound Educators Initiative

Student Learning

The integration of experiential education changes student participation in the classroom, in turn affecting student learning. Of particular impact is the increase in student investment in lessons they create or co-create as the balance of power shifts in classrooms from teachers to students. Experiential education involves students in the creation of knowledge; invites students' questions and the development of connections between experience and course content; and moves students beyond a focus on grades to a focus on the quality of the product through integration of authentic assessments.

Classroom Culture

The NCOBS Educators Initiative gave teachers tools to change classroom culture, in particular helping teachers conceptualize and support intentional community development.

Learning and sharing common language and concepts from NCOBS facilitated a community in which teachers and students experienced and expressed greater trust, tolerance and compassion as a team; in which students accepted challenge and took initiative and responsibility in the classroom; and in which teachers integrated the use of ritual, tradition and celebration in the classroom.

Pedagogical Impact

NCOBS provided teachers with specific pedagogical tools to use in the classroom to facilitate both the content and processes of experiential education. Of particular import was the shifting of power from teacher-leaders to student-leaders, with teachers sharing responsibility for learning with students, inviting student feedback, and focusing on reflective and student-centered practices. The intentional creation of heterogeneous cooperative groups in the classroom led to stronger students expressing patience with struggling peers and working to help them succeed. Teachers increased experiential and project-based lessons in the classroom, took students outdoors more, and developed new community partnerships to facilitate experiential education (e.g., with local Parks and Recreation departments).

Teacher Development

NCOBS developed or reinforced teachers' understanding and appreciation of experiential teaching philosophy and methodologies. NCOBS enabled teachers to learn the value of wilderness and/or outdoor experiences and the challenges they provide,

including the ability to move out of their comfort zone. Experience and practice with experiential education, especially supported practice following the NCOBS model, builds teachers' skills and comfort with integration of experiential education practices. The flexible structure of the Educators Initiative provided teachers with comprehensive baseline knowledge they could adapt and apply as needed in their classrooms.

Teacher Professional Development

Participating as a Kurt Hahn Scholar as part of a cohort strengthened teachers' skills, confidence, and sense of support. NCOBS facilitated the development of community among teachers at their home site, with their partner school, and with colleagues at other schools. NCOBS created accountability for teachers and encouraged sustainability of the program through ongoing contact between colleagues as well as with NCOBS staff. NCOBS gave teachers creative space and extended time to reflect on practice. The intensity of the Wilderness Experience, followed by two retreats gathering teachers at NCOBS facilities created spaces for meaningful, practice-centered and in-depth conversations that sustained teacher investment in the Educators Initiative.

Teacher Culture

As a result of teachers' participation in the NCOBS Educators Initiative, interactions changed among teachers at each school, including and extending beyond Educator Initiative participants. Teachers took leadership roles and focused conversations among professional colleagues about education, including experiential education and student-centered lesson planning.

Recommendations

1. Provide teachers with ongoing exposure to concepts, ideals and strategies of experiential education

Teachers benefit from exposure to, experience with, and support of experiential education in the classroom. The NCOBS model of following the summer wilderness experience with retreats, ongoing crew/cohort meetings, coaching calls, readings, and portfolio preparation exemplify best practice in teacher professional development and support teachers' integration of experiential education. Involving a cohort of teachers from one site supports sustainability of experiential education practices; inviting teachers from diverse settings encourages sharing and learning among colleagues. To encourage persistence and provide sustainability in an educational culture that values high-stakes accountability and serial strategies, new and alumni Kurt Hahn Fellows need support with the integration of experiential education in classroom practices.

2. Embed *education-based* discussions in NCOBS events to augment the value of experiences in teachers' work

To facilitate the integration of experiential education in teacher practice, embed conversations about the relationships between experiential education and curriculum and pedagogy in teachers' earliest meetings with NCOBS, and particularly during the wilderness experience. Teachers value and request more time with colleagues and NCOBS staff to talk about the value of experiential education and the implications of their experiences to their work *as educators*. Opportunities to share experiences, brainstorm ideas, co-develop lessons, and collaborate on experiential projects provide such opportunities and encourage sustainability. To take full advantage of the Outward Bound experience in their practice, teachers need opportunities to talk about curriculum and pedagogy early and often, beginning during the wilderness experience (versus at the end) and continuing through retreats.

3. Provide opportunities for conversation and collaboration among teachers

Teachers relish the opportunity to have conversations about teaching and learning with colleagues and rarely find time to have such conversations during the school day. The intense experience of the wilderness component, as well as the follow-up retreats, have potential to provide teachers extended time to talk and plan together as professionals. Mixing teachers from large and small as well as public and private schools, and combining teachers from different disciplines and specialties provides opportunities for teachers to learn from each other, facilitates greater understanding of and appreciation for others' work, and allows for disruption of stereotypes held about different educational settings. Inviting alumni participation in the training and development of subsequent cohorts of Kurt Hahn fellows will facilitate dissemination and sustained integration of experiential education.

4. Invite Kurt Hahn alumni to consult on NCOBS Educator Initiative components

Alumni of the Educators Initiative are well-positioned to help NCOBS conceptualize individual professional development components. The portfolio in particular can benefit from the first cohorts' experiences to develop it as a useful reflection tool for teachers. Alumni can also help imagine how conversations about curriculum and pedagogy can be integrated more deeply in the wilderness experience. Finally, alumni can consult on a redesign of the NCOBS Educator Initiative website and discussion board to transform it into a more useful tool for participants.

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