

A Transformative Experience: Professional, Personal, and Spiritual Growth for Pre-Service Teachers

Dr. Daniel McKee

Assistant Professor of Education

Neumann University.

One Neumann Drive, Aston, PA 19014, USA.

Dr. Megan Scranton, CCC-SLP

Assistant Professor of Education

Neumann University

One Neumann Drive, Aston, PA 19014, USA.

Abstract

This article describes the professional, personal and social growth that has occurred for pre-service teachers from Neumann University through trips to the Benedictine School in Ridgely, Maryland. The Benedictine School is a year-round day and residential school for individuals ages 5-21 with intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, and autism. For students from Neumann University, there were two primary purposes for these trips to Benedictine. First, these future teachers would have an opportunity to learn about the extensive services provided on behalf of students with significant disabilities, beyond what they would normally observe within local parochial, public, or charter schools. Secondly, this trip to Benedictine would enable students from Neumann to engage in service, an important core value of the University and to reflect on this experience relative to aspects of professional, personal, and spiritual growth that had occurred. This article will describe the positive outcomes for students through their involvement in this transformative experience.

1. Introduction

Over the last two years, semester breaks for pre-service teachers from Neumann University have provided a very special opportunity for professional, personal, and spiritual growth. These students, who are majoring in early elementary and special education, spent three - four days at the Benedictine School, a residential school for students with disabilities in Ridgely, Maryland.

The Benedictine School is a year-round day and residential school for individuals ages 5-21 with intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, and autism. The school is certified by the Maryland State Department of Education for the day program and by the Department of Human Resources which oversees the residential program as well as the community Group Homes. The mission of The Benedictine School is to assist individuals with disabilities in becoming as independent or semi-independent as possible, to make wise use of leisure time, and to live and work in a community setting (Benedictine School, 2015). For students from Neumann University, there were two primary purposes for this trip to Benedictine. First, these future teachers would have an opportunity to learn about the extensive services provided on behalf of students with significant disabilities, beyond what they would normally observe within local parochial, public, or charter schools. One student commented, *"I have never been to a residential school facility and I really want to see the various settings and how they are run. I have also never worked with students with severe disabilities and I wanted to have this opportunity as well. I want to explore this type of setting and see if it is somewhere I may want to work when I graduate."* Secondly, this trip to Benedictine would enable students from Neumann to engage in service, an important core value of the University and to reflect on this experience relative to aspects of professional, personal, and spiritual growth.

2. Description of the Experience

The National Society of Experiential Education defines service-learning as “any carefully monitored service experience in which a student has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what he or she is learning throughout the experience” (Furco, 1996, p. 1). The experiential and reflective components were essential elements of this trip which commenced with a communal prayer service and then a 90-minute excursion by vans to Ridgely, Maryland. The group stayed at the Berg Center, a former convent on the grounds of the Benedictine School that is now used to accommodate guests or visiting groups. After dropping off luggage and supplies, the group went to the school for an orientation program. Information was provided about the Benedictine mission and the various student and adult services offered through the school and through the residential programs. The students also learned about the ministries offered at Benedictine, including a food pantry which supports over 300 families per month, a thrift store, and a home for women and their families who have particular needs.

Students from Neumann then toured the Benedictine School to see the educational programs in which they would be working. These options included serving in classrooms emphasizing functional academics, total communication classes for the neediest students who are non-verbal, and life skills programs. Students from Neumann also had an opportunity to work in conjunction with speech, occupational, and physical therapists, as well as assisting in the gym and the pool. The students then visited the residences where the pupils at Benedictine live. These individual rooms or suites offer a variety of living supports for the students as basic care, daily living skills and recreational activities are provided for the students from after school until bedtime.

After school, the group traveled to two group homes in the area for dinner. These residences are called Robin’s Nest and Jeannette’s Cottage, and four women with disabilities reside in one, and four men with special needs live in the other. Jeannette’s Cottage is named after Sister Jeannette Murray, the foundress of many of the Benedictine programs and services, and the true visionary for this remarkable array of supports for students and adults with disabilities. At the group homes, Neumann students dined and socialized with the residents, and truly enjoyed the interaction. This opportunity helped to provide the students from Neumann a view of how positive the future can be for adults with disabilities when proper care and appropriate resources are provided.

The first day concluded with a reflection, and informal team building activities. Students were asked to consider what they hoped to gain from the experience and several expressed both hope and a bit of uncertainty as to what the next few days would be like. All desired an opportunity to learn more about the services provided for pupils with significant disabilities and each of the future teachers from Neumann University hoped to make a positive difference.

Day two began with a brief prayer service in the chapel at Benedictine. The students then proceeded to their specific service assignments. The experience was intended to be “hands-on” in nature, and that was certainly the case. The future teachers from Neumann immediately engaged in supporting the Benedictine students and became involved in the various classroom routines. Initial sentiments from the students included comments such as: *“I was able to see how different classrooms were run,”* while others were impressed with the quality of staff. *“There are really caring and loving people in this school, who truly have the best interest of these students in mind.”* The general view of the group was summarized by one of the juniors who shared, *“The experience is very eye-opening. Most placements that I have been to are nothing like this school and I think that what they do here is absolutely wonderful. The people are so welcoming and this makes the experience even greater.”*

At the conclusion of their busy day working in the classrooms, the group returned to the Berg Center and enjoyed a student-prepared dinner. The entire group then met to reflect on their initial experiences and reactions. The first part of the discussion focused on what the students liked best thus far. One student noted that *“this trip has given me a whole new view as to what I might want to do in the future.”* Another shared that *“it was the first time I have seen such intense therapy for students with special needs. It was a huge eye-opener for me.”* A third added, *“The teachers made sure to involve us with hands-on experiences in the classroom which definitely increased our understanding of how to work with children with these types of disabilities.”* A fourth commented, *“The welcoming and kindhearted faculty and students stood out the most to me. The teachers were always so kind and patient with the students from Benedictine and the entire staff was friendly toward everyone.”*

The group convened early on the third morning again in the chapel at the Benedictine School to offer thanks and appreciation for the continued opportunity to serve the students. They then eagerly proceeded to their assignments; conducting lessons, assisting small groups and individual students, and generally immersing themselves in the specific educational program which they were serving.

3. Professional Growth

One of the challenges with regard to the implementation of teacher education programs is that there are a limited number of field experience placements available in facilities that serve students with significant and multiple disabilities that include a residential component as well. The opportunity to work in the Benedictine School addressed this challenge and enabled Neumann University students to learn about the broad array of services provided. At the completion of the trip, students were asked to reflect on the extent to which this trip enhanced their professional growth. 100% of the students indicated that the experience was useful or very useful. Sample comments from the students included the following:

- *"This is the type of job that I would love to have."*
- *"I learned to appreciate what I have and I hope that one day that I can be as good an educator as the teachers I learned from."*
- *"It enhanced my knowledge in learning different ways of how to teach students with disabilities."*
- *"Although I learned a lot about special education in the classroom at Neumann, attending this trip helped me to actually experience what it is like to work at a school like Benedictine."*
- *"This experience helped me to recognize that all children are different and we must use a variety of tools and strategies in order to help all of our students succeed."*
- *"I learned how patient you have to be to work with students with severe disabilities; I now know I have to be very patient."*
- *"I learned that working with students with severe disabilities can be demanding, but if you have patience, believe in yourself and believe in your students, anything is possible."*

Furthermore, this experience facilitated the development of a professional learning community within the group. Collegiality is important for teachers and can be directly linked to effective schools (Glatthorn & Fox, 1996). Professional learning communities in undergraduate teacher education can provide the fundamental bridge from candidate to professional practitioner (Hoaglund, Birkenfeld, & Box, 2014). These researchers further noted that the basis for skills needed to function within a collegial learning community must be developed through intentional, scaffolded experiences in an effort to overcome teacher isolation that can lead to the attrition of first year teachers. The reflective component of this experience facilitated the sharing of insights, common concerns, and areas of growth, and provided a basis for a professional learning community among students. When asked if this experience served to foster a professional learning community among the group members, all of the students indicated that this outcome had occurred. Student comments included:

- *"It gave us a look into how to collaborate with other professionals and students."*
- *"We grew in our knowledge and understanding of each other."*
- *"We all got to work together, share, and spend time with others that we may not have necessarily spent time with at Neumann."*
- *"Everyone worked so well together and was so open and eager to help anyone with anything."*
- *"I got to know my classmates and professors better."*

4. Personal Growth

Upon arrival, many students appeared uncertain and apprehensive about their ability to work with this population of students. Britzman (2003) identifies emotion as a key component as pre-service teachers "struggle for voice." Emotion relates to the ways in which becoming a teacher is so much an intimate, personal, and internal drama. Among the feelings students may experience are isolation, inadequacy, and vulnerability. It is imperative that pre-service teachers have experiences outside of their comfort zone in order to move their development forward.

In reflecting on how this experience had fostered changes in their outlook, students were asked to complete the following statement: *I used to think, but now I know* Responses included the following:

- *"I used to think that I would not be comfortable working with students who had severe disabilities, but now I know that I might want to teach them."*
- *"I used to think that this job was scary, but now I know that this is where I want to work."*
- *"I used to think that special education was something that would depress me because of the students' disabilities, but now I know it is rewarding to help students who really need us."*

- *“I used to think that bonding was something that was difficult for a student with multiple disabilities, but now I know that they are filled with love and ready to bond with others.”*
- *“I was initially a little scared, because I had never been exposed to such severe needs before, but it quickly became clear that it was definitely worth it. The students are all so unique and I am so thankful that I had a chance to meet them.”*

One student summarized the feelings of the group in the observation, *“I learned more about myself as a person and future educator.”*

5. Spiritual Growth

In faith-based institutions where service is a part of the spirituality, values, and faith of the students, service-learning is of utmost importance (Ackerman, 2010). Service-learning introduces a social-emotional component to the intellectual learning of course content, and teaching becomes more student-center (Hickcox, 2002). “Engaged scholarship” is a term associated with service-learning to reflect the participatory aspect (Hodge, Lewis, Kramer & Hughes, 2001, p. 675) that links the personal/interpersonal with the academic/cognitive development and enhances student retention (Hubbert, 2002) as well as promoting personal and professional growth.

An emphasis on the spiritual development of students is the distinguishing feature of Christian colleges and universities, which goes beyond the social-emotional aspects acknowledged by secular institutions of higher education (Ackerman, 2010). Certain attributes are common among Christian institutions, and the primary one is the valued-centered curriculum and co-curriculum. At Neumann University, these values are emphasized through the acronym RISES.

The Neumann University Office of Mission and Ministry describes the RISES values as being based upon the way of life which Francis and Clare of Assisi and their followers embraced, which was modeled on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The values which guided their lives were rooted in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and at this time in its history, Neumann University has chosen to give special emphasis to five core values: Reverence, Integrity, Service, Excellence, and Stewardship (RISES). These values are described as follows:

5.1 Reverence

The value of Reverence is described in the Neumann University booklet, *Catholic Education in the Franciscan Tradition* (2009) in the following way: “All creation comes from God as a gift. Having been loved unconditionally by God, we are invited to love, support, and care for life in all stages. Francis approached every person, without exception, with profound reverence. Equality, support, and respect characterized all relationships.” The University emphasizes the sacredness of the worth and dignity of each person and values the creation of a compassionate, welcoming, and reconciling community. Some believe reverence and respect are similar terms; Neumann students often use them interchangeably.

Student participants were asked to describe how the trip to the Benedictine School related to the value of reverence. The students shared the following:

- *“Reverence connects to this trip through the respect that the teachers give their students, as well as to their colleagues.”*
- *“The faculty had respect for their work and for their students.”*
- *“Reverence was definitely a value that I observed throughout my visit to the Benedictine School. Every teacher and staff member respected the different needs of the students and made sure to make the necessary accommodations.”*
- *“Like Neumann, the Benedictine School showed deep respect for their school community and community in the area.”*
- *“Everyone respected one another, what they did, what they said; they all had a commonality about respect and what they were to do.”*
- *“There was not a second during my time at Benedictine that respect wasn’t shown in some way, shape, or form.”*

5.2 Integrity

Integrity is defined by the University as “the foundation for a community where persons live and work, study and play, as brothers and sisters” (Neumann University, p. 22).

Specifically, students are growing in their ability to act fairly, honestly, and ethically, as well as to accept responsibility for the consequences for their actions. The Benedictine trip exemplified this value for the participating students in the following ways:

- *“Integrity: All of the students were treated equally and respectfully. Teachers bring out the best in their students by focusing on their ability, not disability.”*
- *“Integrity is having the power to be honest. The teachers at Benedictine were ‘real’ with ‘real’ thoughts about disabilities and were honest with us that it could be difficult, but it’s worth it.”*
- *“The staff at Benedictine had very strong moral convictions for their students and were very honest with students.”*
- *“The staff of the school put the needs of the students first. Watching the different interactions inspired me to try and do the same regardless of students’ personalities and needs.”*
- *“The teachers came to work every day ready to work. They were able to see if something in their lessons wasn’t working and would admit it. The teachers were always professional, honest, and had a positive attitude.”*
- *“The school gives individuals the opportunity to be successful. It gives them a sense of integrity and skills they should be proud of.”*

5.3 Service

Neumann University defines service in the following way: “Inherent in the mission of Neumann University is the challenge to place knowledge at the service of others. The call to service invites us to be attentive to the needs of all, especially the least among us. We seek concrete opportunities to serve others through volunteer and outreach activities and through academic service-learning” (Neumann University, p. 22). Service is viewed as a life-long commitment to support others with humility, compassion, and love. All of the students responded that the trip greatly related to this value.

- *“Service is probably the greatest connection to the values of Neumann as the teachers were more than willing to help the students in every way they can. It is clear that the teachers truly care about the students.”*
- *“The teachers and aides go above and beyond for their students and it’s really amazing to see their relationships.”*
- *“The teachers give a lot of their time up for the students. They make sacrifices for these kids and that’s admirable.”*
- *“I think the RISES value of service was evident during this experience because the teachers here gave everything they had to help these children succeed.”*
- *“Service is shown through the teachers and how they interact with the students. It is clear that they deeply care about these students, which is why they continue to work with these students every day in order to help them to grow. I believe service is shown every day through all of their hard work.”*
- *“The Neumann students were giving back to The Benedictine School. Plus, the Benedictine students were participating in different activities/jobs that allowed them to give back to their community.”*
- *“Going to Benedictine showed how we represented our school and ourselves. We served at Benedictine as children of God in the way that he would want us to. We served to learn more about the path we want to go down.”*

5.4 Excellence

“Francis and Clare encouraged all to use their personal gifts and talents for the good of all. They regarded all the sisters and brothers as equals in administering their God-given gifts” (Neumann University, p. 23). Neumann University encourages all students to perform to the best of their ability and to practice cooperation in the quest for excellence. Students identified excellence within their Benedictine experience in the following ways:

- *“These students show excellence every day in the little things they are able to accomplish. I think all of these students are amazing and I believe they all do great things each day, even if they are small accomplishments.”*
- *“The overall feel and attitude of The Benedictine School was excellent. Everyone loved working there and it really set the tone.”*

- *“The Neumann students all put their best foot forward and appeared as role models to the students. The Benedictine students were praised and encouraged to do their best.”*
- *“The teachers and other professionals encourage the skills and abilities the students have instead of focusing on those they don’t. They want them to be their best selves.”*
- *“The Benedictine teachers showed excellence in the way they cared for their students. We also showed excellence in stepping up and doing our best.”*

5.5 Stewardship

Stewardship is described in *Catholic Education in the Franciscan Tradition* as “our response to the goodness of God is gratitude and a sense of responsibility as citizens of the local and global community and sisters and brothers to all, especially the least among us” (Neumann University, p. 24). In particular, students are guided to care for creation as a sacred gift from God. When asked how Stewardship was evident within their varied experiences at Benedictine, students made the following comments:

- *“Every professional at Benedictine is responsible for every student. They all share the work and responsibility to ensure their students succeed to the best of their ability.”*
- *“Stewardship was shown by the staff at Benedictine. They welcomed all of us and shared all their resources with us, which we handled with care.”*
- *“The teachers and other staff take care of these students day in and day out 24/7; they give a lot to do this.”*
- *“Students learned to care about our environment through recycling and the various educational programs at Benedictine.”*
- *“The Benedictine students were given jobs (collecting recycling, caring for plants, refilling bird feeders) that ultimately help to take care of the environment. Hearing about these jobs encouraged me to want to do something on my own to take care of the world around me.”*
- *“Volunteering at Benedictine, we showed how we would treat these students coming from a Catholic school and practicing the Catholic tradition. We went to Ash Wednesday mass while there to show how we stay faithful and true to God.”*

6. Conclusions

As a result of this experience, all students reported an increased understanding related to the services provided for this population of students and were able to articulate how the values of the University were integrated with what they were learning. The sense that service learning is the outward manifestation of our mission as Christians (Ackerman, 2010) was clearly evident in the comments offered during reflection activities, both on site and after the group returned to campus. The dedicated professional efforts of these pre-service teachers supported the educational programs at the Benedictine School and provided a wonderful opportunity to learn about this aspect of special education. Furthermore, these individuals served as commendable representatives of the University and an inspiration for future classes of students who are preparing to be teachers. In summary, this visit to The Benedictine School was a transformational experience that promoted professional, personal, and spiritual growth in our pre-service teachers.

References

- Ackerman, B., Parker, K., & Parker, L. (2010). Enhancing Christian School Experiences for Pre-Service Teachers through Service Learning Partnerships. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 19(3), 325-337.
- Britzman, D. (2003). *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach* (revised ed.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Furco, A. (1996, Fall). Service-learning and school to work: Making the connections. *Journal of Cooperative Education*, XXXII(1), 7-14. Bethesda, MD: Cooperative Education Association.
- Glatthorn, Allan A. & Fox, Linda (1996). *Quality Teaching through Professional Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Hickcox, L. K. (2002). Personalizing teaching through experiential learning. *College Teaching*, 45(4), 123-128.
- Hoaglund, A. E., Birkenfeld, K., & Box, J. A. (2014). Professional Learning Communities: Creating a Foundation for Collaboration Skills in Pre-Service Teachers. *Education*, 134(4), 521-528
- Hodge, G., Lewis, T., Kramer, K., & Hughes, R. (2001). Collaboration for excellence: Engaged Scholarship at Collin County Community College. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 25, 675-690. http://benschool.org/TheSchool/who_we_serve.html.(2015). Who We Serve.
- Hubbert, K. (2002). Service learning and learning communities. Student paper. Cerritos College, CA: ERIC Document Reproduction Service (ED4662590)
- Neumann University (2009). Catholic Education in the Franciscan Tradition. Office of Mission And Ministry. 21 – 24.