

Service Learning Reflection Paper  
Kari Pratt

I completed my ten hours of service learning time with the Homework Help program at Lincoln Community Center in Mankato. I worked with the second and third grade classroom, which averaged about 12-15 students each session. A majority of the students that I worked with were originally from Somalia and Sudan, and had varying levels of English.

When I walked into my first class in October, I was quite nervous and had no idea what I was getting myself into, or if I could really be effective in this setting. I imagined that I would be working with children who spoke no English and would be quite shy, and I quite honestly was not sure what sort of homework third graders would have. My fears were quickly pushed aside as the first children in the classroom spoke very clear English and seemed quite enthusiastic. I would soon learn that this energy was not always a positive thing, but it helped me relax immediately. I learned that my conception of what these students would be like was completely wrong, and it opened my eyes to how I formulate ideas regarding certain situations. One of the first children in the room struggled with math, and I worked with her, re-teaching concepts and trying to come up with other examples. I discovered that this ability to teach math creatively would be one of my greatest contributions to this class.

One of the first things that I discovered was that the class was out of control and had very little respect for the teacher. Realizing they had just been in school for several hours earlier that day, I tried to give them the benefit of the doubt initially, but their behavior became worse and worse. After our first session, I asked the teacher what I should do to help control the classroom. We talked before the children arrived the next time I was there and discussed some classroom rules and policies that we were going to put into place. They involved being respectful to all, and the introduction of the “orange sheet,” which was a “fix-it” sheet or behavior plan that the

student would be required to fill out, acknowledging what rule they were breaking and what we were going to do about this. Laying down the rules and consequences seemed to help with some of the behavior problems in the coming weeks.

However, the behavior issues were a problem in every Homework Help session in which I volunteered. The students knew the rules, yet pushed the limit. One of the communication goals in which I wanted to improve on was involving conflict resolution. It is a topic that I have heard a lot about, but have never used with children. This class gave me a chance to put this technique to use. It felt awkward at first, however, I felt that it was effective. On one of my last sessions with Homework Help while we were in the gym, a young girl stopped taking turns jumping rope and started yelling at other students and pushing them out of her way. As we rope-twirlers asked her to get in line and she would get her turn, she went storming off and started crying. I calmly approached her and asked her what was wrong and how we could make it better. I asked her what happened, how she felt, and how she thought others felt when they got yelled at and pushed away. She answered all my questions, and even though some of the questions needed to be asked a few times before we arrived at the truth, we did not have any other problems that day. After this experience, I think I would be able to use this technique when conflicts arrive in my classroom or in other areas of life in general.

I was able to use the things I had learned about the class as a powerful tool during my last session as the classroom teacher was going to arrive thirty minutes late. I was the only volunteer working with the class that day, so I took control immediately and made some plans for students when they came in. After finding out that the majority of the children did not have homework that day because they had just taken a math test, I had to think on my feet. I found some coloring sheets, made enough copies for all the kids, and was able to keep the children on task and under

control until the teacher arrived. She was pleasantly surprised by the relaxed and controlled atmosphere when she came in. This was an example of when I was in control, or had power. It felt great to prove to myself that I could manage a classroom, even with no resources or lesson plans available to me at the time. I felt that I used this power in a respectful way, and it helped to keep the children safe and on task. Had I been timid or unsure, the classroom would have perhaps been more rowdy, less respectful, and things would have been chaotic when the teacher arrived. This also relates to one of the values that I listed. During my five visits to Homework Help I was able to distinguish myself as a competent leader, I was actively involved, and I earned the respect of the teacher I was working with and the coordinator. They had enough confidence in me to leave me in charge of the classroom, and this meant a lot to me, even though I felt slightly stressed at the time.

This service learning experience was eye opening for me in so many ways. I really grew attached to the children and the mission of the program. I did something that I was not sure I could do, and I did it well. I earned the respect of those around me, which was very important to me, and they considered me an asset to their program. As a future educator, I could have some of these students in my class down the road, which was part of my urgency to teach them math. I know that if these students do not acquire the basics of math, they will struggle with every math class they have in middle and high school. This experience allowed me to use creative ways to teach basic skills, and I imagine this is something I will use throughout my teaching career. It also gave me a taste of what classroom management may be like, and how some students require more personal attention. I would return to this program in a heartbeat and recommend it to anyone looking to get involved with the community. I intend to return for a week or two in December when their other volunteers are done for the semester.