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Hearing the Call to Serve: My Experience with Service Learning

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Appendix E - UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM
SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Rebekah Capps

College: Arts and Sciences Department: Psychology

Faculty Mentor: Robert Kronick

PROJECT TITLE: HEARING THE CALL TO

SERVE: MY EXPERIENCE WITH

SERVICE LEARNING

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: [Signature], Faculty Mentor

Date: 4/24/23

General Assessment - please provide a short paragraph that highlights the most significant features of the project.

Comments (Optional): Rebekah did a fine job with integrity for personal opinion in a Title I elementary school with workshops in service learning & social psychology. She was a delight to work with during class & this senior project.

Hearing the Call to Serve:

My Experience With Service Learning

Rebekah Capps

Senior Honors Project

University of Tennessee-Knoxville

May 2003

Hearing the Call to Serve: My Experience with Service Learning

I have been fortunate to receive an extensive university education over the past four years. The academic challenges presented me have been appropriate and comprehensive, and partnered with much social growth and development, my experience at the University of Tennessee (UT) has adequately prepared me for the future to come. However, had it not been for a specific course taken throughout my sophomore year, I would not have the views on education that I adhere to today. This impacting course was entitled "Service-Learning" and incorporated work in the Knoxville community schools with an academic standpoint. I spent time in a first grade classroom at Christenberry Elementary School under the tutelage of teacher Mrs. Elizabeth Bunker. I attended class twice a week and wrote journal reflections often. It did not take long for me to benefit from this "hands-on" style of learning, and my satisfaction with the status quo of the education system in America significantly decreased.

In covering this material, the definition of "service-learning" must be clarified, for this will be important in comparing its practice with that of "volunteering". Volunteering provides a "feel good" fix to many Americans today. An individual is encouraged to contribute time and money to those in need, as a fulfillment of societal "duty". I worked for a large corporation in the community outreach department the past two summers, where I saw an enormous emphasis placed on the company's image in the community. Employees were encouraged to donate time, sometimes paid hours during work, to involve themselves in a community cause. A company established foundation set aside millions of dollars specifically to honor non-profit organizations. This is well needed, and

I do not intend to discount its importance, however many more factors come into play in solving our community's problems than, say, simply showing up once a week at a food kitchen.

I have been involved in many extracurricular activities, including participation in Team VOLS, the volunteer organization on UT's campus. Through Team VOLS I have served at area homeless shelters and nursing homes, assisted after school programs, constructed homes with Habitat for Humanity, worked at a handicapped horseback riding facility, and helped with environmental cleanup efforts. From these volunteer efforts I have received many times over what I was able to give, and the results have been an increase in my awareness of the various issues plaguing American communities and an appreciation for diversity. However, my experience with service-learning went a step further.

The concept of service-learning has emerged in the last 40 years and is still not clearly understood by the general population, as it is often confused with volunteerism. Jane Kendall reported in her 1990 research that there are 147 definitions of service-learning in literature (Eyler, 3). Eyler and Giles, prominent Vanderbilt professors and experts on the service-learning process, define four common views of the practice: "‘service-LEARNING’: learning goals primary, service outcomes secondary; ‘SERVICE-learning’: service outcomes primary, learning goals secondary; ‘service learning’: service and learning goals separate; and ‘SERVICE LEARNING’: service and learning goals of equal weight, each enhances the other for all participants" (Eyler, 5). It is this last balanced definition that Eyler and Giles promote. To put it in more basic wording, former U.S. Commissioner of Education Harold Howe defines service-learning

as, “helping others and reflecting on how you and they benefited from doing so” (Schine, iv). While many may view this interpretation as too simplistic, it does indeed incorporate two core values of the service-learning process, that of “helping” and “reflecting”. Such actions clearly set it apart from volunteer activity.

The volunteer efforts across the world are noble and vitally needed for non-profit and community based programs to operate. Countless human beings suffer in a multitude of conflicting ways, and the answer to their woes lies in the hands of those who are able and choose to serve. Service-learning definitely includes volunteerism into its operations, *however* it does not just “stop” at this. As professionals on the subject, Eyler and Giles have “embraced the position that service-learning should include a balance between service to the community and academic learning and that the hyphen in the phrase symbolizes the central role of reflection in the process of learning through community experience” (Eyler, 4). The concept of volunteerism is incorporated into service-learning, however volunteering in of itself does not accurately incorporate the entire vision of service-learning. Academic pondering must be critically involved in the process. “We accept that any program that attempts to link academic study with service can be characterized as service-learning; non-course-based programs that include a reflective component and learning goals may also be included under this broad umbrella” (Eyler, 5). In one’s study it is important to note the best practices to use in achieving specific outcomes and goals (Eyler, 5). In other words, the critical thinking involved is not the end alone, but rather a means to an end, an end that involves effective action. The learning in service-learning involves taking the time to study and consider current issues and problems facing those with whom one is involved.

Perhaps no one has written a more inspiring work on the subject of service and the desperate need for it today than psychiatrist Robert Coles. This Harvard professor's work The Call of Service introduced me to a world I had never known. In it I saw countless possibilities and opportunities for making an impact, both for my peers, my community, my country, and myself. In the introduction of his book, he contemplates, "I have wondered what to make of what I have seen and heard, and what to make of those of us who put ourselves in situations where we straddle our 'regular' world and a world we 'visit.' (I use those words because so often I have heard them used)" (Coles, xvi). Those who initially begin service may see it as a separate part of their already compartmentalized worlds. I know I did!

William Carlos Williams once said, "We're completely lost in our own world-egoists! Or maybe we're locked into ourselves, and even though we want to break out, we can't seem to do it...how do we place our mind (and heart and soul) in a position- a place both literal and symbolic- that encourages our eyes and ears to pick up what we might otherwise miss" (Coles, 24)? Service-learning was a revolutionary concept for me as a sophomore in college. Honestly, in the beginning phases I preferred the volunteerism I had known in the past, where I could enter in and out of the situation on my own terms and boundaries. I could go in without having to rearrange my thoughts or attitudes, and it was frankly, quite easy. Service-learning was challenging for me, and developing even the mindset to truly observe and reflect was a strenuous process for me. I continuously dealt with the distractions of my "regular" world- homework assignments, club meetings, social engagements, personal problems and situations. But it was only a matter of time

before this other world penetrated my own and seeped into the very fiber of my being. In this process the “call of service” was heard and a passion ignited.

Service-learning means taking the time to consider one’s own personal values and motivations to serve. It was in this that I gained an expanded perception of my personal strengths and weaknesses, insight into solutions for the communities around me, and a comprehension of what role I could play in the midst of this. From an academic standpoint I learned how to study the issues at hand more specifically and clearly. As a psychology major, my “research” in the classroom of a local elementary school provided enormous insight into the human mind and soul, igniting my curiosity and fueling passion for my studies.

Service-learning began for me with weekly morning visits to seven-year-old Christenberry Elementary School, an institution servicing a low-income area in north Knoxville, Tennessee, as well as over a hundred homeless children. Christenberry was created by combining three small area schools into one in the fall of 1996. Throughout my sophomore year, I arrived on Thursdays around ten o’clock, just as the crazy daily activities of first graders had ensued. Upon entering the classroom I was warmly greeted by both the teacher and the students, and quickly was assigned to a specific one-on-one reading session. The majority of my work in the classroom consisted in this tutoring effort. I would attentively listen to a child read a book selected for his/her specific reading level, and when in need of assistance I would help them pronounce words or grasp the meaning of a sentence. With the conclusion of the book it was time for the student to take a comprehensive reading exam on one of several classroom computers. These exams were given through the Accelerated Reader computer program. I would

again patiently sit with the young boy or girl and serve when needed. The time in the classroom was important to me, because I knew that these students thrived off of any personal attention given them, something many of the students might not have consistently received in the classroom or at home.

The relationships I developed with the students were not primarily a result of my time in the classroom, but rather in the unlikely setting of the school cafeteria. Each week I would stay to eat lunch with the students and supervise while Mrs. Bunker took a break. This time of interaction was a joy for me as I watched the students “loosen up” and let their personalities shine. I would sit at a table as the students argued over who would sit with me, and then we would discuss ordinary things such as their families or what they liked to do. I tried to vary whom I sat with every week to make it fair. It was in this enjoyable setting that I believe their trust in me developed and flourished. They knew that I was primarily concerned with relating to them, not about breezing in and out of the classroom with nothing more than shallow conversations and directions for schoolwork. After lunch, I would come back and either read some more with the students or facilitate various learning centers that Mrs. Bunker would set up. I would do this until my departure at one o'clock. I count it as a privilege that I was able to participate in a college class specifically designed to develop service learners, and that I could benefit from this elementary school setting not during just one semester, but two.

There are many salient characteristics of Christenberry that have remained in my memory. I have heard many people speak of the class size problem facing public schools. I did not actually see a problem in the size of Mrs. Bunker's class. The class sizes at Christenberry have continued to decrease, demonstrating a greater commitment to the

students. The current average class size is the lowest the school has ever had. When I was in Mrs. Bunker's class, she was able to keep them under control and it never seemed to be too loud or distracting. Although it didn't always work out this way, there was a realistic way to make time to give personal attention to each child. It definitely helped to have the volunteer supply that Mrs. Bunker was privileged to have. There was almost always at least one other volunteer in the room when I was there. This allowed Mrs. Bunker to do more work with the class as a whole while the volunteers spent time with individuals. This shows the importance of having people from the community involved in the schools. The best example of this is when parents of the students in the class come in and help. This benefits the parent in that he/she becomes familiar with their child's surroundings, education, teacher, and friends. The parent gets on the same "page" with their child, and can continue the education process at home. It benefits the child to have their parent there, because he/she feels valued and cared for, and realizes the benefits of education because their parents are placing such importance on it. And lastly, the teacher is enabled to invest more of her time in other members of the class.

I was so blessed by the relationships I formed while working at Christenberry. As I got to know each child, I saw amazing gifts and abilities that made them so unique and special. I also began to understand their backgrounds and influences. I had many kids tell me of fathers who were in jail, mothers who were living with random men, and other situations in which the children were having to constantly move around and switch schools. I recently asked Mrs. Bunker about this "turnover rate" that I remembered and she agreed that it was a problem. "Yes, the mobility rate is pretty high," she said, "When you get a new student it takes a little while to really know them and where they're at."

I can recall several of the students I got to know. I watched an extremely overweight girl named Donna¹ eat packed lunches of candy and chips that her mother had given her. Granted, I was glad her mother cared to pack her a lunch at all, but it was highly unhealthy. I fell in love with an autistic girl named Marilyn. She was very quiet and was often made fun of, and I would see her crying. I admired Marilyn so much because of her determination and courage. She never let her disability get in the way of anything she did. She was one of the brightest students in Mrs. Bunker's class. I also loved observing Sandra, an outgoing African American girl. She was a born leader, and everyone in the class watched what she did and how she acted. She used her sharp mind to her advantage and did very well on her schoolwork and in reading. However, her attitude would get her in trouble as she often mocked Mrs. Bunker or got in a fight with one of her classmates. Sandra did wonderfully when she assisted others, and I think there needed to be more opportunities for her to execute her leadership skills.

The two children that perhaps came to mean the most to me were Ronald and Jacob. Ronald was an African American boy who worked best when moving around and participating in hands-on activities. He often got in trouble for his "misbehavior" and I think that discouraged him. His teachers needed to be aware of Ronald's specific learning styles, and then provide activities that catered to his needs. I deeply cared about Ronald because underneath his tough exterior he had the sweetest heart, and he greatly desired love, attention, and affection.

Another boy named Jacob provided me with my most memorable experience at Christenberry, because I was with him the first day he read a book. Jacob struggled all year long with reading, mainly due to the fact that he could not focus on the material. In

¹ Students' names have been changed to protect their identities.

March he was finally prescribed medicine to help his hyperactivity and it did wonders. It was quite a moving experience to be with Jacob on that turning point day when reading just “clicked”. The joy on Jacob’s face showed how much he had longed for the day when everything made sense to him. He was so determined to finish the books he was reading and to pronounce each word. Unlike most of the students I worked with, he did not count on me to help him and he read completely on his own. It was also neat to see Mrs. Bunker’s reaction to Jacob’s success. She lavished praise on him and you could tell she was also moved by the whole experience. I was so blessed to witness firsthand the “fruits” of positive change from the school system.

A problem we discussed in my service-learning class that I noticed at Christenberry was unhappiness in the teachers. This is a more serious and prevalent problem than many may realize. Plenty of teachers have been in their profession for several years and are worn out from the mundane and repetitiveness of their daily tasks. The hard work and stress from their job can get the best of them. Their courage, energy, and creativity have been exhausted. They are not being sufficiently paid for their efforts, and this can cause them to lose momentum and commitment. Some teachers may feel discouraged and restricted by the politics that go into America’s school system. They may also neglect a valuable support group that could be found in their peers. Ideas may be shared and encouragement given from fellow teachers who have an understanding of what it is like to be in America’s public schools. I did not see this type of support demonstrated at Christenberry two years ago. The teachers seemed fairly isolated and left to fend for themselves. This might have reflected the ideals and priorities of the school’s principal, because she had a very withdrawn presence. In my year of being at

Christenberry I saw the principal once in our classroom and once in the hallway, and at neither time did she take the time to really interact with the students, teachers, or me. If the principal takes good care of his/her employees I believe the overall life of the school would greatly benefit. Christenberry operated within the classical bureaucracy frame that most elementary schools fall under these days. It was a very structured and routine environment that didn't seem to encourage much creativity or change. Each teacher seemed to know his/her role and responsibilities and did not venture out from there. The principal did not seem to show much interest in her staff or the student body.

Bolman and Deal, in Reframing Organizations, developed five basic structural organizational categories that working groups fall under. They are simple structure, machine bureaucracy, professional bureaucracy, divisionalized form, and adhocracy. Each structural design can be effective if utilized correctly and under the proper circumstances. A simple structure model has two levels with a supervisor directly overseeing his/her employees. Machine bureaucracy involves more levels of power, with an overseer and several support staff and managers underneath him/her. A professional bureaucracy can be seen with a strategist leading an equal group of professionals. The divisionalized form has a variety of divisions working in most ways independently of one another. (Bolman, 63-68) Adhocracy "is a loose, flexible, self-renewing organic form tied together mostly through lateral means...adhocracy functions as an 'organizational tent'" (Bolman, 68). As previously mentioned, Christenberry formerly functioned in a bureaucratic framework. One of the downfalls of this method is that "solutions from the top may not always match the needs of individual units" (Bolman, 65). It was obvious during my time at Christenberry that the majority of the teachers there were not having

their needs met. The apparent boredom of the staff could have been a result of not having their voices fairly heard. They might not have been given the opportunity to provide input into the functioning of the school. As a result of such bureaucracy it was easy to also see divisionalized forms creeping in, as teachers resorted to acting on their own and independently of one another.

However, a recent visit with Mrs. Bunker offered great encouragement. I interviewed her during a break from her newfound position, that of "Literacy Leader" for Christenberry. She left her role as a first grade teacher to implement the approved "Reading Excellence Grant" that she helped submit to Knox County. The program uses various methods to improve overall literacy in the school and targets low scoring students who need the most help. Although my time with her was limited, it was encouraging to see the changes being established throughout the classrooms. This must be credited to the hard work of Mrs. Bunker as well as to the cooperation of both teachers and administration. Christenberry no longer appears to be in a stagnant routine, but rather aims to bring about needed transformation with time. Mrs. Bunker expressed this sentiment, "It takes time to effect change. It may be another year before we will see because we're trained by the state. We have ten days of training in the best practices of reading, and our training just ended last month. To implement the whole thing it may take some time." One must note from this statement the participation by the state, teachers, and administration to gradually improve and meet their goals. In her own words, Mrs. Bunker specializes in "enabling teachers to use best practices and teaching strategies." Perhaps Christenberry is moving out of their worn framework into a more innovative and active structure.

A specific program that is succeeding through the reading grant is in the extended day kindergarten classroom. Whereas most kindergarten students dismiss at one o'clock, targeted students have been chosen to remain for an extra hour and a half. This time is definitely not intended for play and leisure, but rather involves an intense time of reading for these low scorers. Three teachers stay and facilitate reading groups of six. Mrs. Bunker reports that they are now "way head-and-shoulders above other kindergarten children so we can see a big difference".

Another effort school-wide has been longer library hours that allow parents to come after school and check out books for themselves. Mrs. Bunker admitted that in general many of the parents struggle to be literate. This greatly affects the amount of practice and consistency a child experiences at home. The students who do have literate parents are generally the ones who do not struggle as much with reading in school. Through Christenberry's parent programs it is hoped to increase the reading level in school families.

Mrs. Bunker believes that the greatest need for teachers is better instruction and access to information. "I think the top thing for anybody is having professional development. If you know what a child needs and you know how to teach then you don't need anything else," she said. Mrs. Bunker has chosen to champion this cause in order to benefit Christenberry as a whole. With her vision and initiative the school is seeing greater steps taken toward excellence and fulfillment of their mission statement: "The mission of Christenberry Elementary School, while continuing a caring, community-centered tradition, is to insure that students acquire skills necessary to become productive citizens and life-long learners through a safe, nurturing, interactive, learning

environment” (“Christenberry”). Christenberry may now be under the structure of professional bureaucracy in that each teacher appears to have been given more equal weight. Communication seems to have been better facilitated in the school because problems are being addressed and dealt with sufficiently. The framework a school operates under is important because it must attempt to satisfy the needs of the administration, teachers, and students.

Upon my completion of the interview with Mrs. Bunker, a few questions remain that I would encourage others or myself to explore in the future. She was very hesitant to elaborate on the needs and role of the Christenberry administration. I do not know if this is a result of unawareness on her part, lack of communication, or perhaps simply out of respect for the administration’s own opinion and impact. Nevertheless, a principal plays a critical role in the functioning of today’s schools, and I would be curious as to the insight one could gain from interviewing other Christenberry teachers or the administration itself. This leads into my questioning if Mrs. Bunker’s positive elaboration of the successful implemented programs is one-sided, or if the evidence is felt school wide? Mrs. Bunker obviously has a unique vantage point in that she spends adequate time in each classroom. Whereas she may feel quite connected, this does not necessarily mean that the school is making large improvements in communication among all faculty and students. I trust Mrs. Bunker’s experiences to be quite valid to her personally, but the question still remains of the impact throughout the school in development and changes.

An excerpt from my journal towards the end of my time at Christenberry provides great insight into the meaningfulness of my learning:

“It has been neat to see the progress of the students throughout the year. First grade is a huge developing year, in which a lot of reading and writing skills are firmly established. There has been amazing transformations in many of the students I work with as far as their academic abilities. More importantly, I have seen a change in my relationship with the students. We have become closer and they have come to trust me more and more as they see me consistently coming back each week...This semester I have learned a lot about the field of service learning, about the communities in Knoxville, and about the issues at hand. This has contributed greatly to my overall experience at the school, because I better understand where the children and teachers are coming from.”

There are many ways that my service-learning experience benefited me. I was so glad it was in the context of a college class, because it caused me to really examine my motivations, the settings I worked in, and the community of people with whom I interacted. Prior to Christenberry, when I had been involved in community outreach and service, it had been easy for me to participate but give no further thought beyond the immediate activity. Through class lectures and discussions, as well as my personal journal entries, I was encouraged to put time and consideration into my service-learning experience. It helped me to apply this same deeper thought process to other areas of my educational and campus activities, as well as my personal life.

Another important change that occurred while I was involved in service-learning was a greater awareness of my community and the seriousness of the issues facing it. One can easily neglect what occurs beyond their sphere of influence. Robert Coles testifies, “I slowly learned to abandon my reliance on questionnaires and structured

interviews and instead to *do*, to experience service, and thereby learn something about what those young people had in mind as they went about their activist lives. I learned that the 'methodology' for a research project had to do with *definition*, first, and then *vantage point*, meaning the way a word such as 'service' is variously interpreted and the manner in which the observer looks and listens" (Coles, 13). In the current Western method of education, students have sunk into a routine of being passive observers, not participants in their educational process. This service-learning experience took me out of comfort zone and into a place that was worlds removed from what I had ever known. Suddenly there were "vantage points" beyond my own that offered greater insight into the human existence. It softened my heart towards people who were less fortunate than I, and made me more compassionate. It also taught me patience in the midst of times of despair; a subject Coles also covers in his book. There were particular situations that seemed hopeless to me, but I learned to give what I could and trust certain decisions that were beyond my range of capabilities or expertise.

The question remains, where am I now, two years after this amazing experience called "service-learning"? To summarize, I am still deeply involved in the process of learning, and have been humbled enough to understand that this is an endless lesson to be engaged in for a lifetime. In some ways I have made steps forward since my time at Christenberry, but frustratingly there are many ways in which I have remained stagnant. A huge impact still felt from this time period is my chosen major. I declared my study of psychology after taking the service-learning course, primarily because I could not get human behavior and motivation off of my mind. I feel that behavior can be best understood and modified by grasping what lies behind the actions. Another impact was

my decision to participate and then lead an Alternative Fall Break (AFB) trip with Team VOLS. Through AFB, I was able to implement service with both personal reflection and group discussion, and the leadership and facilitation within this role allowed me to express cares and concerns illuminated to me first in my service-learning courses.

The most lasting impact from these endeavors was the importance I now place on involving myself in a future that utilizes my passions and gifts. I saw too many teachers at Christenberry, although I am sure this is consistent in most professions everywhere, who were burned out and in turn quite ineffective. Although this could be a result of many issues, the lesson I took from that is to incorporate reflection into my everyday life. By assessing the “status quo” of my daily routines, I can make needed changes and be reminded of my goals and motivations. I want to surround myself with needed accountability and fellowship, acknowledging my need for others’ involvement in my life, both personally and professionally. No matter where my future takes me, I want to be involved in work that I genuinely feel passionate about. Although this seems a little idealistic in such hard economic times, the root of service can be found in one’s attitude, and this is something I should always be in control of over myself.

The mentioned changes are positive ones indeed. However, it would be unfair for me not to admit my shortcomings in the service-learning process. I intended to continue my involvement at Christenberry Elementary School, so as to be a consistent presence in the students’ lives. This did not happen because I let my schedule serve as an excuse not to act. I unfortunately did not return to the school until my recent interview with Mrs. Bunker.

I also find myself occasionally judging or criticizing someone based on external circumstances when I have done nothing to learn of the motivations behind their behavior. I remember going into Christenberry with preconceived notions of the students' academic and social ability, only to have those prejudices shattered. It frustrates me that today I still can slip into seeing through a biased lens.

Another regret I have is not utilizing my developing knowledge in psychology to better others, particularly students in schools like Christenberry. The last few years have been ample time to continue learning from the many facets of these elementary students' lives. Granted, action can still be taken in my future. I still have unanswered questions about the service-learning field. I would like to hear and study more follow-up cases from service-learners, particularly those enrolled in university courses like I was. I would like to know the impacts they feel from their experiences and then compare it to my own. I also could not help but wonder during my interview with Mrs. Bunker to what an extent a school can change a child's direction? I most certainly understand the necessity of successful reading skills, but how does that translate outside of school, for example, in a community where education is not valued or encouraged?

Although I stand here today still changing and developing, I am still so grateful for the service-learning experience that I have had, and I hope to implement service into my life from now on. In the initial stages of his research, Robert Coles stated, "I had begun to see how complicated this notion of service is, how it is a function not only of what we do but of who we are (which, of course, gives shape to what we do). My father might have argued otherwise, stressing the primacy of the deed; but the doer of the deed wears a face, has a touch, and speaks in a particular way" (Coles, xxvi). Although

service-learning brings up many issues and problems, it is ultimately a pretty simple thing. It involves taking some time out for other people. It is offering one's presence in the life of someone else and using one's abilities to benefit others. It involves sacrificing a little comfort, a little naivete, and a little effort. Service-learning is placing others' interests before yourself.

Coles interviewed an assembly-line worker who visited a nursing home close to his home on a regular basis. This service-learner offered the following encouraging words to explain his experience:

"It's more a person-to-person thing, and it's us trying to be friendly to people who aren't having the best of times. I know it does help everyone- the community- when you go and visit the old folks, but I don't think of it as service. To me, service means, like, the military, or you're doing something you've *got* to do, or you've been *told* to do it, or you've been *sentenced* to it, because you got in trouble with the law. To me, what we do is- well, it's us trying to offer something from our hearts, only we all get together, and we're organized about it" (Coles, 48).

That is what my experience was. It was a group of University of Tennessee students coming together in an organized fashion and offering all that they could, extending themselves beyond the boundaries of a stifling classroom setting. The more citizens can realize this call of service, the more action we will see in America's communities. Change has to start small, and I believe that each of us is capable of making the little differences that could cause great revolution.

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Transcript of Interview with Elizabeth Bunker

April 7, 2003

Capps: This is really kind of open-ended, but I just want you to describe what it's like to be at Christenberry and your experience from the beginning until now.

Bunker: When I first came to Christenberry I came from a very little school. We only had 220 children in a very old building. I came to a very large building combining three schools so that was a *big* change. We didn't know the children as well. At the little school we knew everybody, so that was one of the negatives.

Capps: And then you've been here for...

Bunker: Seven years, since it's opened.

Capps: Has it been a positive experience?

Bunker: Well, I think it just took time to get to know the larger community, rather than the small community at Oakwood. It just took some time, but I think that's one of the most important things- to really know your families- and I didn't feel like I knew them when I came here.

Capps: Were you at a Knox County School before?

Bunker: Yes, one of the little ones that fed into here.

Capps: And when did you take on your new title?

Bunker: This school year.

Capps: What's your title?

Bunker: Literacy Leader- we got an ongoing grant, a "Reading Excellence Grant".

Capps: I think you might have been working on that when I was here.

Bunker: Right, so we got that. It was the only one in Knox County. It's really to promote literacy, to get the children up to reading. It's a precursor to reading first.

Capps: So what does your every day look like now?

Bunker: I work with teachers and work with students also, just really enabling teachers to use best practices and teaching strategies.

Capps: Were the scores really low for Christenberry?

Bunker: Yes, scores for low.

Capps: Do you know if they've increased?

Bunker: I don't think we would know this soon. It takes time to effect change. It may be another year before we will see because we're trained by the state. We have ten days of training in the best practices of reading, and our training just ended last month. To implement the whole thing it may take some time. One of the programs we've initiated through the Reading Excellence Grant was in one of the extended day kindergartens. Our lowest students stay until 2:30 instead of going home at 1:00. So we do assess them every six weeks or so and they are way head-and-shoulders above the other kindergarten children so we can see a big difference. It's very intense- there's no play- just direct teaching to a small group of six. Three teachers stay.

Capps: Are these all the kindergarten students?

Bunker: No, just those that were identified as needing extra help. They scored the lowest on the literacy test.

Capps: And they stay late every day?

Bunker: Every single day, yes. So there are 18 of them that stay every single day and three teachers that alternate every two weeks.

Capps: What other programs are there?

Bunker: Well that has been the most successful. We test all students and see where about the other students are.

Capps: So do you work with all the grades?

Bunker: K thru 3. And we have after school tutoring and that's two days a week. And personally I haven't seen it making that much difference, because it's not every day. And if they've missed one day then that means they've missed for an extended period of time.

Capps: Do you feel like any of them get practice at home?

Bunker: Not much, some do but those are the ones who aren't struggling. We have also opened the library two nights a week from three to six. The parents can come check out books and read and take an Accelerated Reader test. Then we have a parent program, which we've always had.

Capps: Is there a high literacy rate for most parents?

Bunker: No, and that's just a generalization, some of them do. The students who are struggling generally have parents who are struggling too.

Capps: I remember when I was in your classroom it seemed like there was a bit of a turnover rate, with students being taken out to move to a different school. Does that happen a lot?

Bunker: Yes, the mobility rate is pretty high.

Capps: I would think that would effect their scores.

Bunker: Yes, absolutely. When you get a new student it takes a little while to really know them and where they're at.

Capps: Do you find that the teachers need more help than they are getting?

Bunker: Well, our classes are very small, much smaller than they have been in past.

Capps: How many students are typically in a class?

Bunker: 15, some even less, so there's really low numbers, the lowest we've ever had.

Capps: Do you miss teaching in the classroom?

Bunker: Yes, I do, but then I get my fix by going in and seeing the children. This week we've had a new teacher so I've been in that room more and I've been thinking, "Oh, I miss this!"

Capps: What do you think the greatest need is for teachers at Christenberry?

Bunker: I think the top thing for anybody is having professional development. If you know what a child needs and you know how to teach then you don't need anything else. So I think we're getting that now, but what we need is time. We just haven't had the time to pull it all together. We've had snow days and many other issues to face.

Capps: Is there a prominent them you see students struggling with the most?

Bunker: So many kids don't come prepared. They're not ready for school. There are also some that behavior affects them.