From Desert to Garden: Reconnecting Disconnected Youth

Linda Sandler

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcetribalnations
Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcetribalnations/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Topics in Service Learning at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tribal Nations Documents by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.
From Desert to Garden: Reconnecting Disconnected Youth

Linda Sandler, Judith A. Vandegrift, and Candace VerBruggen

Out of a forgotten patch of earth, at-risk teenagers cultivated a traditional Native American Yaqui garden. In the process, they transformed themselves as well.

Imagine the Sonoran desert of the Southwest. Dry, brown, crusted earth. A scattering of low scrub. The prickly thorns of an ocotillo cactus. The majestic silhouette of a saguaro.

In this arid place, a transformation takes place. The earth is overturned and irrigated. A mosaic of plants and walkways takes shape. What was once a neglected patch of ground is now a traditional Native American Yaqui garden. Children and tribal elders walk along the paths—admiring the beauty and “listening to the wind and Mother Earth.”

The transformation of the desert—and of the 13 Yaqui students who created the garden—was not accidental, but the result of an innovative educational program for at-risk youth. The Pascua Yaqui Educational Group Effort (PYEdge) combines intensive basic skills training with pre-employment skills training. The program is part of Arizona’s Serve America, which was created by federal legislation passed in 1990. Serve America funds innovative programs that link schools with community agencies to involve school-age and out-of-school youth in volunteer service to their communities.

Giving Students an Edge

The program serves members of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe, who live on the Yaqui Reservation 12 miles outside of Tucson. Participants are among the nearly one-third of reservation students who drop out of Tucson high schools each year. Some work toward a high school diploma; others seek a GED or to reenter high school. These are young people who not only feel out of place in the traditional school system, but also lack roots in their own community.

A cornerstone of the program’s curriculum is its student service learning model, which incorporates preparation, action, and reflection activities (Duckenfield and Swanson 1992). Its developmental opportunities promote personal, social, and intellectual growth in addition to civic responsibility and career exploration.

Program participants are among the nearly one-third of reservation students who drop out of Tucson high schools each year.

Through coursework, students identify and analyze community problems and needs. Then, as a group, they plan a project.

The Yaqui garden illustrates how the Pascua Yaqui Educational Group Effort helped one group of students better connect with their own culture, traditions, and beliefs. Of the 13 students, 2 were teen parents, 2 were youth offenders, and 1 youngster had a history of substance abuse. They identified a lack of cultural awareness—among themselves and other Yaqui people learned horticultural skills, including how to prepare beds for a dry climate, plant low water crops, irrigate and fertilize the plants, and properly maintain a garden. They listened, spoke, researched, read, wrote about—and lived—the project.

At more than 10 workshops given by Native Americans, students learned about and were encouraged to reflect on the significance of the native garden in terms of Yaqui culture, tradition, and belief systems. To better connect with “Mother Earth,” some students went...
on a sunrise meditation walk, planned with tribal spiritual leaders.

**Personal Success Stories**

Examples of what these young people accomplished speak for themselves. Here are a few:

- One student wrote an article for the *Sonoran Journal*—learning about writing and publishing while creating community awareness of the garden project.

- Students presented a Yaqui storytelling session and garden tour for Head Start children. To prepare themselves as storytellers, they observed older tribal storytellers, then adapted Yaqui legends about the plant world for the children.

- Students researched, wrote, and produced a trilingual coloring/activity book for Head Start students and other community youngsters. In the process, they drew pictures of plants from their garden, researching the English, Spanish, and Yaqui words for each plant name. Students not only produced a valuable community resource, but also participated in an entrepreneurial enterprise.

- Students organized an Open Garden for the Yaqui community and other guests from Tucson. In addition to preparing and distributing informational flyers, students developed a detailed map of the garden beds; hosted a coloring corner to display their coloring/activity book; and conducted guided tours of the Native Garden.


These are young people who not only feel out of place in the traditional school system, but also lack roots in their own community.

As the project director said:

The students in this project aren’t the type who sit on student council or belong to the newspaper club. In this alternative setting, however, these young people were able to risk taking part in organized group activities and experience the recognition, approval, and pride that results...

They also benefited greatly from the cultural and spiritual workshops, which enabled them to learn about and feel pride in being a member of the Yaqui Tribe. Having been part of a successful community service project, students feel that they were given permission to consider other problems in their community, and were legitimized in speculating about potential solutions.

The personal narratives of individual students are the best testimony of the program’s lasting effects. Take Frank, who was out of school for three years before enrolling in this project. During his dropout years, he was an active gang member. As part of the garden project, Frank drew many of the pictures in the student-produced coloring book, among other activities. Currently working toward his GED, Frank is also helping to renovate homes on the reservation, as a carpenter’s apprentice in a program sponsored by the tribe.

Or, there is Vicky, who was out of school for two years before joining the program and working with the Head Start children as part of the garden project. Since receiving her GED, Vicky is on call as a teacher’s aide in a local elementary school—in addition to working for the Pascua Yaqui tribe.

**Documenting Success**

Success stories like Frank’s and Vicky’s contribute to a widely held belief that community service helps...
By contributing to their community, these youth, in turn, began to think of themselves as community members with a stake in what happens.

learning is of particular significance in addressing the education of at-risk students, for whom more traditional educational strategies have been less than compelling. In making connections for students among education, communities, and work, these types of activities are both relevant and promising.

As a result of this particular program, more than the earth was transformed: 13 Yaqui teens were recast from dropouts to successful learners, from young people likely to use community services to those who provide services, from students who need help to those who help others. They reconnected with their community, and, along the way, learned skills to help them in the world of work.

References


Linda Sandler and Judith A. Vandegrift are Research Analysts with the Morrison Institute for Public Policy, School of Public Affairs, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-4405. Candace VerBruggen is the Edge Program Manager, PYEdge/Pima County Adult Education, 1602 S. 3rd Ave., Tucson, AZ 85713.