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Service Learning

The Promise and the Risk

Alice L. Halsted
Joan G. Schine

Service learning, the pairing of meaningful work in the community and structured reflection, has the potential to transform schools. It provides opportunities for young people to test new roles, develop skills, apply academic learning in a “real world” setting, and move toward responsible citizenship. Service learning can reinvigorate traditional classrooms and turn passive students into dynamic and engaged learners. However, unless it is implemented with care, with a solid rationale and clearly articulated learning and service goals, service learning will fail to realize this potential. The power and the promise of service learning are too great to allow this imaginative method of teaching and learning to go the way of other creative approaches — mis-interpreted, implemented with inadequate preparation, and then abandoned.

Disclaimer: Service learning is not the “solution” for school restructuring, adolescent alienation, or poor performance on standardized tests. We are ardent advocates of service learning. These two statements, while contradictory on the surface, when taken together constitute the thesis of this article: the rush to anoint community service as the “solution” to the complex problems the nation faces in educating the next generation almost ensures for it the same fate as other promising, creative approaches have met in the history of public education. We argue that service learning has the potential to reinvigorate traditional classrooms and turn passive students into dynamic and engaged learners, but its implementation carries no guarantee of “product satisfaction.”

Service learning’s success will depend upon the care and attention with which it is executed. It can change the ethos of a school, but it is not without its challenges and risks. In the haste to find the quick fix for some stubborn and multifaceted problems, service learning may be tried, or rather sampled, as one would test-drive a car, only to be rejected after too short a time for the next all-purpose “solution.” This must not be allowed to happen; there is too much at stake. The power and the promise of

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service learning, especially for the young adolescent, are too important to be treated as another fad in education like the initial teaching alphabet. The challenge for policy-makers is to confront the rigors of this approach to education, explore them with care, and move schools toward becoming stimulating and effective learning environments in which young people can succeed.

A Context for Service Learning

Young people used to hold important roles in the family or community as a matter of course. In contrast, young people now are faced with years of being viewed as unproductive in a society that places its greatest emphasis on productivity. Yet this need not be the case. There is a growing number of societal needs that young people, even as young as eleven or twelve, are well equipped to address. Chief among these is the need to restore a sense of community. There is a void in our society where concern and care for one another used to be. Adolescents who help to care for and teach young children, assist those with handicaps, tutor their peers, visit the aging, clean up a stream, mediate playground disputes, are filling that void and responding to society's other needs. At the same time as they are providing service to the community, they are becoming better readers, learning about human development or the environment. Through community service, young people recognize that they can assume meaningful roles and respond to the real needs of others, as well as to their own need to be needed. Increased self-reliance and a sense of accomplishment accompany service to others, especially when that service is also publicly recognized and appreciated.

Whatever the form, community service becomes service learning, and has a lasting effect, when there is time for what we at the National Center for Service Learning in Early Adolescence call guided reflection — an opportunity to prepare for the service experience, to learn the skills and competencies that give meaning to the work, and to review and reflect on the service experience. For young people just beginning to confront the future, this reflection provides a structure for exploring and expanding their world, a time to develop insights and to consider the responsibilities of citizenship.

Service Learning and School Reform

There is widespread agreement among educators and others that reform is urgently needed. Unanimity in defining that reform or in visualizing restructuring is harder to find. Efforts at restructuring, changes in school governance and in the way decisions are made, recognize the logic of giving teachers, parents, and other adults involved in the schools a voice. But reform is a far more ambitious goal than is implied by restructuring. And if educators and policymakers are serious about school reform, change must occur not only in school governance, but in the experiences that children have. Nowhere is this more evident than at the junior high or middle school level. However, given what we know about the developmental needs and characteristics of early adolescence, it is evident that the answer does not lie in "more of the same" or the "get tough" emphasis on content that is advocated in some quarters. Young adolescents need to move about, to test, to increase their autonomy, to be accepted, and to develop a sense of self-worth. No single formula or program will

meet all needs, or serve the diverse population of our public schools, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that community service is uniquely suited to meeting the needs of the middle school student.

With few exceptions, the experience of practitioners who have initiated service programs suggests that implementation, even where the theory is applauded, faces resistance. The recurrent question is, What will we have to give up in order to institute a service program? If we are to realize the potential of service learning, that question must be turned around. We should ask, How can the commitment to service, and the service experience itself, be integrated in the academic areas? Service becomes the curriculum instead of a “pleasant add-on.”

Sophisticated projects, with complex learning goals, are suited to adolescents. A theme approach, such as world hunger, might be addressed through service at a food distribution center. In the classroom, the same theme can be explored through virtually every academic discipline, from crop rotation and rainfall in science and geography, to computing individual and collective nutritional needs in the math class, the economics of food distribution and transportation, as well as the efforts of governments to address these problems in social studies, and so on. A simple food drive which can spark the burgeoning idealism that is a hallmark of the young adolescent becomes the nucleus of a wide-ranging investigation. Along the way, young people are not only mastering skills, but they are also being reminded of the needs of others and the imperative to act in helping to meet the community’s needs.

Service Learning and Citizenship

When young people experience the personal rewards of service, when they witness how their participation benefits the community and its members, there is little doubt that some of them will develop a commitment to service and citizen participation that will reach far beyond their school experience. They will have acquired some sense of themselves as part of a team, as individuals capable of assuming responsibility and creating change.

Teaching good citizenship through community service is not a new idea. One of the earliest evidences of active learning took place between 1917 and 1921 in McDonald County, Missouri.¹ For four years, high school students designed projects as diverse as determining the cause of typhoid in a town resident’s home to tracking how mail was forwarded at the post office. The young people even organized a trip to the state penitentiary after a resident of the town was sentenced to serve a term there. This trip represented a follow-up to a unit on the justice system. These high school students were seen as resources to the town and their work intrinsic to the town’s well-being. High expectations yielded substantive results.

Seventy years later, researchers set out to determine the long-term effects of this experiential learning on the youth involved. Despite the difficulties of tracking down participants and locating extant records, the findings pointed to academic improvement among those who were involved in this curriculum and a carryover in positive attitudes toward community involvement over a lifetime.²

Especially during the first half of this century, young people were engaged in community projects in many communities across the country. In one striking example, high school students in Pulaski, Wisconsin, near Green Bay, rejuvenated a

dying town with efforts that ranged from publishing a weekly community paper to constructing a factory, which they then enticed a shoe company to lease. Student curiosity, a hallmark of the adolescent, was encouraged, and among the results were a safer water system, the resumption of home construction, and a revitalized school system.

The National and Community Service Act of 1990 has reawakened interest in school-based community service; this interest has been reaffirmed by the passage, in August, of the National Service Trust Act of 1993. Schools, state departments of education, local school boards, and community agencies are exploring ways of involving young people in meaningful roles in the community. These acts take their place alongside the handful of legislative initiatives that do not simply set aside funds and promote specific action, but represent a vision. If realized, this vision — the “renewal of the ethic of civic responsibility in the United States” — can create major change in virtually every aspect of our national life. Why must the country be made to relearn the extraordinary, restorative value of school-community connections? It is up to policymakers to craft meticulous approaches to service learning implementation lest this peak in interest crash in a valley of other failed promises.

The Educated Person in the Twenty-first Century

Today's student, regardless of intellectual ability, career aspirations, or family background, must be equipped for living in a very different century, in an environment and society we cannot fully anticipate. As the world becomes smaller and competition more intense, our society is redefining what it means to be an educated person. The product of the traditional school may be adept at test taking but unprepared for the demands of the twenty-first-century workplace. The content of today's curriculum serves primarily to develop intellectual habits and capacities that are likely to be applicable to other times and settings. The curriculum must balance skill development with content coverage, which may be outdated before it is used. To prepare youth for the future, the school curriculum must develop intellectual skills and an understanding of humankind that permits the student to gather information, organize it in a meaningful fashion, evaluate its veracity and utility, form reasonable conclusions about it, and plan for individual and collective action.³

In 1991, the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills examined “changes in the world of work and the implications for the world of learning.”⁴ The SCANS panel determined that global competition and advanced technologies require a new “adaptability and ability to learn and work in teams.” The panel developed a set of competencies and a foundation of skills and personal qualities required of high school graduates if they are to compete effectively and succeed in the world of work. Workers in the next century will need to be proficient in problem solving and reasoning, effective and flexible working in teams, and ready learners. Equally important are the requisites of personal qualities that include individual responsibility and integrity.⁵

Service learning prepares young people to take on new responsibilities in challenging settings where they must think on their feet. Reflection seminars afford students an opportunity in a safe and nurturing environment where they may hone new skills and examine their performance, in order to increase competence at the placement

site. Students are encouraged to develop the habit of weighing alternatives and learning from mistakes and achievement. This is constructive preparation for the worksite where the central measure of success is performance.

Looking Back

About every five years, education in the United States finds a new rallying cry. Right after World War II “life adjustment education” was emblazoned on the banner of school reformers. A similar notion . . . prospered in the colleges under the slogan of “general education.” As these labels became dog-eared in the 1950s they were supplanted by new catchwords, each claiming to point to a new “right” way for American teaching and learning.⁶

Service learning can be a critical factor in counteracting the despair that colors the outlook of many of our urban youth, enabling them to take control of their lives, to understand that they can become agents of change. Its potential for playing a part in renewing the ethic of citizenship is too great to risk allowing it to become one more fad, to disappear as it is imperfectly implemented.

One need not have a particularly long memory to recall the short-lived “glory days” of “programmed learning,” of the open classroom, F.L.E.S. (Foreign Language in Elementary School), team teaching . . . the list is endless. We cannot afford to allow service learning to become the latest entry. As we turn our attention to expanding the world of the student, and trying to equip young people for the multitude of unknowns in the future, service learning can become the process by which young people prepare to meet the demands of a new century.

The Benefits of Service Learning

There are many compelling reasons for learning through service. Whether landscaping the courtyard at Iroquois Middle School in Louisville, Kentucky, or running a literacy program at the Center for Families and Children in New York City, youth are acquiring skills: critical thinking, problem solving, planning. Their self-image improves legitimately not because of imagined good feelings but rather as a result of increased competence.

Service is pre-employment preparation. Young people can acquire employability skills, learn about the varied roles of workers, and gain some understanding of employers’ expectations and of the behaviors of the workplace.

The service experience offers an opportunity to “educate for democracy.” As George Wood of Ohio University wrote,

With proper attention to all the individuals within the school, we can create an experience for students that demonstrates what it means to be an . . . involved citizen. For it is only within a community, not an institution, that we learn how to hold fast to such principles as working for the common good, empathy, equity, and self-respect.⁷

But the most important reason to encourage service may be because it teaches young people to be caring, compassionate human beings. We speak today in despair-

ing tones about the loss of civility, about a “meism” that has gripped the nation. The alienation of youth has reached crisis proportions. As described in *A Matter of Time*, a report of the Task Force on Youth Development and Community Programs of the Carnegie Corporation, children spend less and less time with adults.⁸ They are literally raising one another, without the stabilizing influence that adults provide. The isolation of young people has resulted in a rift between them and society’s institutions. Service learning involves youth in active roles in the community and establishes a new relationship between young people and adults. Thus it can become a powerful force in bringing generations together and reconnecting youth to the community.

Participating in service affords young people the opportunity to try on new roles, develop a sense of competence, take part in a world of adults where they can see a place for themselves and show concern for what is “right.” They startle themselves and their teachers with their insights and newfound competence. Where they have seen themselves as *receivers* of services, they have now become service *providers*, able to contribute something, however modest, to the world. The change they exhibit is dramatic.

We know of no single initiative that can reach more young people in a more significant way, engaging and challenging them, giving them a sense of worth, while at the same time serving as a catalyst for improving school and community climate. As Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Council on Teaching, has said, “Community service should not be viewed merely as a sentimental undertaking.”⁹

It would be ridiculous to claim that participation in community service would right all the wrongs of life for children in America today — children growing up “unconnected” and without hope. But we do claim that seeing something change for the better through one’s own efforts — making a child laugh, teaching her to jump rope, helping a younger student conquer his homework, wheeling a resident of a convalescent home into the spring sunshine, talking with a shut-in, clearing a recreation center of graffiti, or getting a stoplight installed at a dangerous intersection — *making* something happen, rather than *letting* it happen, *doing* rather than being *done* to — with all the skills and information the tasks convey — can impart a sense of hope, of constructing a better future. ♪

Notes

1. Jan Austin and Richard P. Lipka, *Ellsworth Collings’ Project Curriculum and Follow-up Study*, 1989.
2. Ibid.
3. National Association for Secondary School Principals, Council on Middle Level Education, *An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level* (Reston, Va.: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1985), 5.
4. The Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), *What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for the Year 2000* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, June 1991), v.
5. Ibid.
6. Harold Howe II, *Openness — The New Kick in Education*, reprint (New York: Ford Foundation, 1972).

7. George H. Wood, "Teaching for Democracy," *Educational Leadership* 48, no. 3 (November 1990): 33.
8. Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. The Task Force on Youth Development and Community Programs, *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, December 1992).
9. Charles H. Harrison, *Student Service*, foreword by Ernest L. Boyer (Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1987), ix.

“We don’t know the extent to which our public school system has provided a kind of glue that has held this nation together. That glue may be very important in terms of the cultural cohesion [our nation] has had.”

— Abbie Thernstrom