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Joan Schine

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## School-Based Service: Reconnecting Schools, Communities, and Youth at the Margin

**T**HE SOUND OF GUNSHOTS WAS NOT particularly unusual in Washington Heights, a section of New York City where drug deals were common and children learned early to be vigilant. But on a late summer day in 1992, the fatal shot came from a police revolver, and it was a Dominican, a drug dealer, who was killed. The ensuing turmoil, born of the immediate crisis but a reflection of the long-standing antagonism between the youth of the neighborhood and the police, soon became a riot. Most of the police in the local precinct were White. The overwhelming majority of the young people were Dominican (Sullivan, 1992).

Following the incident, sixth-grade students at the Community Service Academy, a school-within-a-school near the scene of the shooting, discussed the problem of relationships between police officers and young people. They concluded that one factor responsible for the hostility was lack of a common language. Learning that the police academy offered cross-cultural training, they decided they wanted to participate. In their Spanish classes at school, the students invented games to teach the officers Spanish and later became language tutors at the precinct house. In other classes, they developed skits to help the police understand issues affecting young people in the neighborhood.

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The sixth graders called themselves the "peace team." Although it was their intention to change what they believed to be the attitudes of the police, ultimately learning was far from one-sided. Richard, one of the sixth graders, put it clearly: "I first thought that the officers were bad. I was afraid of them. Now I realize that they are people too." In the past few years, young people and officers in Washington Heights have visited neighborhood elementary schools together. As Bertha, another sixth grader, explained, "We'd like to work with more younger children, so that when they get big like us, they are not scared of police officers any more."<sup>1</sup>

Sixth-grade students on the peace team had various opportunities to participate in learning. They identified a real need, performed a significant service, took a role in decision making, planned their activities, and reflected on the meaning and impact of their work. They contributed to their community and experienced the rewards of positive participation. They practiced communication skills and learned to negotiate. They found that adults took them seriously when they presented a thoughtful proposal. For the inner-city members of the peace team, nearly all minority and poor, the project provided an opportunity to become the doers, rather than the "done to." Gaining the attention and respect of peers and adults is an empowering experience for the young, and especially so

for those who see themselves as ignored or disenfranchised.

Recently, Dominican students at the Community Service Academy organized a cultural exchange workshop which three dozen officers attended. The middle-school students recruited the director of the City University's Dominican Study Institute to offer a mini-course on Dominican culture and history, and ample time was provided for questions and discussion among all participants. The peace team, born at the Community Service Academy in New York City, is a contemporary, successful example of a continuous theme in education, the effort to connect school and community.

As director of the Early Adolescent Helper Program and (until 1995) of the National Center for Service Learning in Early Adolescence, I developed and provided assistance to a variety of service learning programs for middle schools. In that role, I came to know a variety of such programs, involving diverse age groups and populations in urban, rural, and suburban settings. While there is substantial variety in the specific content of school-based service learning programs, all share a commitment to involving young people in meaningful service and to reinforcing the bond between school and community. This article draws upon the experience of the schools and community agencies, and of the young people and their leaders, to illustrate the several ways that service learning is implemented and how it can foster positive youth development.

### **Development of School-Based Service**

A philosophy of learning through experience provides the foundation for the school-community connection. John Dewey (1938) is usually seen as the early voice for experiential learning in this country. However, long before Dewey, children were learning by doing. Centuries ago Socrates observed that learning should be moved "from the shadow of reality to reality itself" (NASSP, 1974).

In the decades since Dewey wrote about the role of experience in learning, and the centuries since Socrates suggested that learning occurs best when connected to reality, there have been many exemplars of the methodology variously known as experiential learning, action (or active) learning, and, more recently, service learning. In 1974, the

National Association of Secondary School Principals pointed out, "A number of schools today are . . . assisting students to find learning stations in work and service organizations, [and] alert schools are promoting a new era of reality in education" (p. 1).

In the 1970s, there was a spate of reports and recommendations on the reform of secondary education. Language such as "action-learning" (National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education, 1973), "nonacademic content in schools" (Panel on Youth, 1973), and "integrating institutions of education and the broader community" (Gibbons, 1976) appeared regularly in the recommendations of various distinguished panels and commissions. However, it would not be accurate to say that they created a groundswell of support. At the time, there were some service learning programs on college campuses and in a scattering of high schools and sectarian schools, but not in public middle or elementary schools.

Between the 1970s and 1990s, concern grew over the mismatch between student needs and interests and the curriculum of the public schools. In the search for curriculum relevance, experiential learning and community service gained stature. The passage of the National and Community Service Act of 1990,<sup>2</sup> followed by President Clinton's signing of the National and Community Service Trust Act in 1993,<sup>3</sup> generated new enthusiasm for service learning at all levels of education. Federal funds made available for Learn and Serve America, the K-12 portion of the 1993 trust act, inspired a proliferation of programs throughout the states and encouraged educators and community-based organizations to seek new ways of collaborating. Planners, policymakers, and practitioners began to look to service learning for a fresh approach to reconnecting urban youth to the school and community.

### **Early Adolescence**

Service learning addresses some developmental needs of early adolescents that may be neglected in the academic curriculum. Among these are the need to acquire and test new skills, develop a range of relationships with both peers and adults, be permitted to make real decisions within appropriate and clearly understood limits, have the opportunity to speak and be heard, and discover that young people can make a difference (Lipsitz, 1984; Toepfer, 1988).

A need for recognition and appreciation is a developmental need that cannot be overstated. Society is quick to note the shortcomings of its youth, but often reluctant to celebrate the strengths. The successful accomplishment of a well-designed service project, whether service to individuals or organizations or action on behalf of a cause, will bring recognition to young participants.

Often students who will never see their names on the honor roll for academic achievement, or who will not be found among the stars of the playing field, have their first experience of success and recognition in school or community through a service activity. It has become a truism to say that young people's service in and to the community benefits the service providers at least as much as it benefits the recipients of their service. Whether cleaning up the environment, restoring a park, visiting with the elderly, or assisting in a day-care center, not only do young people assume responsibility and practice new skills but perhaps most critical, they see themselves as capable of effecting positive change.

Young people emerging from childhood, regardless of socioeconomic status, embark on the search for identity. They seek answers to the perennial questions of adolescence, "Who am I, and where do I fit in?" Thoughtfully-planned projects that allow them to test new roles, do real work, and relate to adults and peers as coworkers and problem solvers can help them navigate the difficult transition to a fulfilling, constructive adult life. In today's urban environments, hope is often in short supply and the struggle of day-to-day survival can obliterate any thought of taking control of one's life or any vision of a personal future. Service learning programs can guide young people toward taking control of their lives in positive ways.

### **Urban Youth**

Although in general the developmental needs of the early adolescent cut across distinctions of race and class, the search for ways to meet those needs takes on special urgency for inner-city youth in neighborhoods where the social fabric is frayed. Problems of inadequate health care, meager recreational facilities, and joblessness are part of the everyday scene. Young people find few adult role models. Single parent homes and homes where no

adult is present in the after-school hours are more the rule than the exception.

Early adolescents in the city are not content with the recreation and homework help programs that serve younger students. Eager to expand their world and test themselves in adult roles, they reject traditional after-school programs. As an article title puts it, early adolescents are "Too Old for Babysitters, Too Young for Jobs" (1987). While suitable activities may be available in middle class and affluent communities, young people in the inner city often have only two choices: "hang out" in the neighborhood or go home to the television set. Many of them are uneasy about the temptations and hazards of the street.

While there is a shortage of suitable after-school programmed activities, opportunities for community service in inner-city neighborhoods are almost limitless. Child-care programs, senior citizen centers and convalescent homes, museums, shelters for the homeless, meal and food distribution centers, public libraries, conservation and recycling programs, and environmental protection organizations all seek volunteers. Young people themselves will identify still other projects, which may be as simple as planting spring bulbs in a school yard or as complex as rehabilitation of an abandoned building. For example, in the early 1980s, the members of East Harlem's Youth Action Project turned an abandoned building into a shelter for young people who needed a place to stay.

Given the rich possibilities for service in urban environments, newly-aware and idealistic adolescents often need adult guidance in setting goals that offer some possibility of success. The demands of the task must be matched with the capacities of the group. Adolescents will welcome a challenge but will become discouraged if a positive outcome is too distant or entirely beyond their reach. It is helpful to remember that novices in the sphere of community change are more likely to continue as activists if their earliest efforts lead to some success. Well-intentioned administrators and teachers, enthusiastic at the prospect of forging links between school and community, should help youth set realistic project goals.

Major impetus for community service programs in the after-school hours originated from The National Commission on Resources for Youth, which

operated from 1967 to 1986. The commission promoted what its founder, Judge Mary Conway Kohler, called youth participation and identified community problem solving as one category of participation. The commission's position statement outlined familiar service learning elements: involvement of youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs; opportunity for planning and/or decision making affecting others; critical reflection on the participatory activity; and group effort toward a common goal (The National Commission on Resources for Youth, 1974, p. vii).

The commission was the parent organization for the Early Adolescent Helper Program. The program, an action component of the National Center for Service Learning in Early Adolescence, was initiated in 1982 in three inner-city schools in New York City. In 1995, the National Center for Service Learning in Early Adolescence became the National Helpers Network, an independent not-for-profit organization.

### **Helper Programs**

The 1982 pilot sites for the Early Adolescent Helper Program were located in the South Bronx, the East Elmhurst section of Queens, and East Harlem, communities with few resources for early adolescents in the after-school hours. Two days a week after school, student helpers were involved in hands-on service at day-care and Head Start centers. In school, the helpers had classes for preparation and reflection on their service. One eighth-grade student explained why she liked being a helper, "I was afraid I'd get to be like the other kids on my block if I didn't have anything to do after school."

Inner-city schools, compared to those in affluent communities, customarily enroll a greater proportion of students who are considered to be "at risk" because of poverty, limited English proficiency, or other factors. Service learning activities can supplement the academic remediation that at-risk students often require. One such project, "helpers promoting reading," was initiated in 1991 by the Early Adolescent Helper Program to prepare middle school students to read aloud to preschool children. The helpers practice the simple stories appropriate for young children and receive training in choosing, reading aloud, and critiquing children's books. The reluctant or be-

low grade level helper can develop reading skills with the young child's materials, free of the stigma or feelings of inadequacy that sometimes accompany remediation. The appreciation that young children readily express rewards the helper.

In a related program, youth from the Erie County Detention Home in western New York state who had been adjudicated as PINS (Persons in Need of Supervision) were enlisted as tutors for a Buffalo elementary school. As an experiment, three residents received 2 days of training and then went daily to the school where they tutored small groups and served as aides to the classroom teachers. At the program's start, a staff worker escorted the detention-home residents to and from the elementary school and remained in the building while they were tutoring. After 2 weeks, however, this security measure was abandoned and the tutors took responsibility for arriving at the school on time.

Pre- and posttests showed that all three tutors experienced dramatic gains in self-concept. The classroom teachers saw the tutors as "capable, sincere, and hard-working young people," a far cry from the labels the courts used to describe detention-home residents (The National Commission on Resources for Youth, 1981, p. 11).

Somewhat similar to the Erie County experiment, but now in its 13th year, is the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program developed by the Intercultural Development Research Association in San Antonio, Texas. In its first 9 years the program is credited with having kept 800 young people, previously estimated to be at severe risk of becoming dropouts, in school. The program was designed to encourage Hispanic students with limited English skills to stay in school by fostering "self-pride and a feeling that they belong in school."

The program is subjected to rigorous evaluation. Measured against a carefully-selected comparison group, the students have shown significant gains in math and English. Potential dropouts say the program has helped them believe in themselves, learn that they are smart, and learn from others by teaching them. Its success is attributed to three key elements: Participating students are valued; support services are provided; and meaningful relationships among schools, families, and community organizations are established (National Helpers Network, 1993).

The Enviro Helpers at Robert Wagner Junior High School is another example of the students-as-helpers concept. City agencies and private non-profit organizations were enlisted to support the Enviro Helpers project. The students started by proposing questions for a comprehensive survey of their schoolmates' attitudes concerning the environment. It was clear from the questions they formulated that adolescents are preoccupied with many of the same issues that concern adults. Examples are: "Do you think homeless people should be driven away? Does it bother you that all the trash we store up is bad for the environment?"

The Enviro Helpers decided to call themselves the "green team." Doing hard manual work, they became a team in fact as well as in name. They kept journals that started with what they hoped and expected to accomplish. At first, they simply planned to clean up the edges of John Jay Park and plant bulbs. Later journal entries expanded to include additional plans and evaluations throughout the year. They discussed their work and their impressions in a weekly class. As often happens when the community becomes a laboratory for the students, there was serendipitous learning that was as significant as that which was planned. In their work at the park, they came to know some of the homeless who were park regulars. They discovered a common humanity they had not before considered.

### **Problem Solvers**

Another program design that originated from the National Center for Service Learning in Early Adolescence primarily addressed the aim of solving community problems in contrast to serving in a helping capacity. Effective community problem solving requires advanced skills of several types as demonstrated by a program titled Community Problem Solvers: Youth Leading Change.

Piloted in Queens, New York, in the summer of 1993, the program is particularly suitable for urban populations and settings because it conveys a message that youth are capable and worthy of trust. The program's subtitle, Youth Leading Change, implies confidence in young people's capacities and motivation. As youth become problem solvers they are empowered, acquiring and practicing skills that they can employ as change agents beyond the life of the project.

Community Problem Solvers has been further developed by the National Helpers Network and field tested in a number of sites. A written guide for teachers and program leaders outlines strategies for helping students identify problems and determine a course of action (Community Problem Solvers, 1996). Typically, a problem-solving program starts with developing an understanding of the group process and the collaboration that will be necessary for success. Teams of students identify the strengths and skills they embody as a group. After team building is well under way, the students embark on a community needs assessment.

They explore their neighborhoods with a new perspective by asking, "What needs to be improved or changed, and does our team of problem solvers have the knowledge, skill, and resources to do it?" Communication and interpersonal skills are honed through interviewing peers, members of the community, and agency and government personnel, and reporting findings orally and/or in writing. Observation skills come into play as they see the community in terms of needs and resources.

As the group decides on a project, connections to the formal curriculum are made. In one park improvement project, it was necessary to estimate the quantity of crushed stone needed for pathways. Computations of area and volume moved from the math class to the physical environment. Other projects may call for negotiating the intricacies of municipal offices or discovering where the decisions about such things as placement of traffic lights or the location of collection depots for recycling are made. The study of local government takes on new meaning when tied to community problems.

### **Conclusion**

If service learning is to realize its potential and become truly integrated into the American education system, it must, like any activity that involves the time and effort of students and teachers, maintain a high standard. Quality service learning combines personal and intellectual challenge, fosters pro-social attitudes and behaviors, and enriches the academic curriculum through constructive, age-appropriate activity and ongoing guided reflection. Service learning has the potential, when carefully planned and implemented, to create a new sense of community, make the curriculum come

alive, and reawaken students' commitment to their own education.

Service learning is not the wonder drug of the 1990s. It will not rescue every inner-city dropout or gang member. It will not provide all of the volunteer support that institutions and individuals so sorely need. To reverse the downward spiral of our inner-city neighborhoods, the energy and commitment of government at all levels, the private sector, and individuals is essential. However, in opening a path for active, participating citizenship and offering a vision of a society where citizen involvement is welcome and effective, service learning can be a powerful factor.

### Notes

1. Quotation taken from a researcher's transcribed interview, Spring 1994.
2. The National and Community Service Act of 1990 (S1430) became, on passage, Public Law 101-610.
3. The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 was enacted as HR 2010 and became PL 103-82.

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**TIP**