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Abstract: Among the people of both Japan and the United States, there is currently widespread concern that the student population is in trouble, that students are losing interest in civic participation and their moral sensibility. Educators in both countries are looking toward service-learning as a means of recapturing a sense of civic responsibility in today's young people. The article discusses mandated service-learning and required service-learning in schools in Japan and Maryland.

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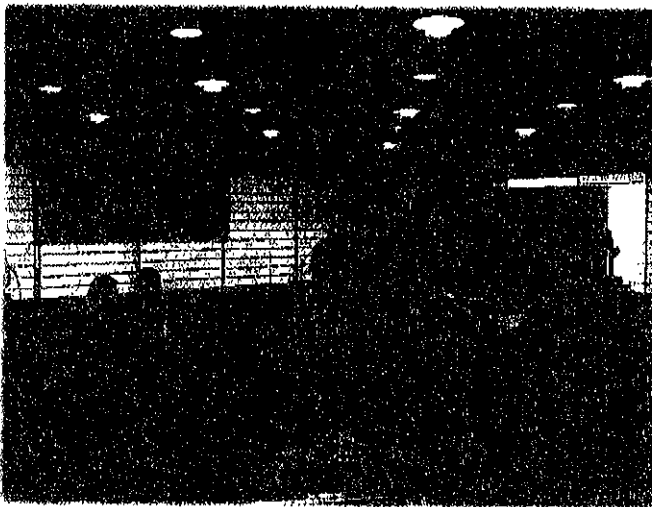
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Service Learning in Contemporary Japan and America

"Everyone can be great, because anyone can serve."
 — Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



JOSEPH R. FEINBERG

Introduction: The Problem

Among the people of both Japan and the United States, there is currently widespread concern that the student population is in trouble, that students are losing their interest in civic participation and, more broadly, their moral sensibility. Such concerns are not especially new to the United States, though the recent tragic outbreaks of violence in the schools have moved these concerns into the national spotlight. "Only 37 percent of Americans believe that when today's children grow up, they will make this country a better place."¹ And 67 percent of American adults now typically use negative adjectives, such as "rude," "irresponsible," and "wild" to describe teenagers.² In Japan, instances of violence are, relative to the United States, more rare, though several recent school knife attacks have served notice to the country's citizens that they, too, must do something to preserve the integrity of their youth. The Foreign Press Center points to increases in student violence, bullying, and truancy as indicators of such moral decline.³ What can be done to arrest this perceived decline? Educators in both countries are looking toward service learning as a means of recapturing a sense of civic responsibility in today's young people.

What Is Service Learning?

At the turn of the twentieth century, educators developed the social studies as a discipline in order to help cultivate in students "an active participatory citizenship."⁴ Service learning, too, shares this goal. Although the term service learning is relatively new (established in the 1970s), the origins of promoting nonmilitary service date to the early 1900s.⁵ American intellectuals, such as William James and John Dewey, established the philosophical foundation for the modern service movement and youth participation through public schools.⁶ Under the contemporary conceptualization, service learning encourages students to become involved in their communities by combining academic learning with community or school service activities. Service learning, like community service or volunteerism,

engages the students in real-life problems, differing only in that the problem-solving experience is integrated with academic requirements and involves structured student reflection.

The benefits of service learning are many and immediate. Students are much more easily motivated to learn when confronted with real-life problems that need solutions. In addition, "Service learning increases students' awareness of the community and world around them, the unmet needs in our society, the agencies and institutions involved in attempting to meet those needs, and a variety of strategies that they can use to create a better world."⁷ In addition to increasing students' motivation and knowledge, service learning also teaches students to develop compassion and empathy for others.

A quality service-learning project, for example, might have a student or group of students examine a number of concerns and identify an issue. The issue should be selected by students to ensure they will find it personally interesting and applicable to a service project. After identifying the issue, teachers or facilitators should assess how well students understand it and use school curriculum and subjects, such as the social studies and science, to establish a core knowledge.

For example, if the issue is hunger, one lesson might involve science and the social studies to learn about nutrition and identify, chart, analyze, and discuss the geographical regions of food sources.⁸ In addition, students might examine demographic and economic data to learn about the food needs of the population they desire to serve. Activities might involve students visiting a grocery store to evaluate the cost and origins of various foods or inviting guest speakers from a local food bank. After establishing a well-researched understanding, goals should be created by the students to direct the service project. Students should choose a service project that addresses the issue directly ("direct service"), channels resources to the issue ("indirect service"), or actively works to eliminate the problem and inform the general public

about the issue ("civic action").⁹ For example, a project relating to hunger may use an indirect approach to assist with local food needs and implement a canned food drive for a food bank. Students might also work to encourage community partnerships with parents, businesses, and organizations.

Students should be encouraged to reflect on their experiences throughout the service-learning process and perhaps keep journals to track their understanding and learning. Reflection is an essential element of service learning, helping to ensure that students learn from their experience. Finally, teachers should celebrate the success of projects through certificates, newspaper articles, or other forms of recognition that acknowledge student efforts.¹⁰

Service Learning in Japan

Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) recently instituted "The Education Reform Plan for the Twenty-First Century," also known as "The Rainbow Plan." One of the plan's seven priorities is to teach youth to become "open and warm-hearted ... through participating in community service and various programs."¹¹ The ministry's policy requires "all school students" to perform community service—elementary and junior high school students for a period of two weeks, senior high school students for one month.¹² Service learning has thus become one avenue by which the Japanese educational system intends to encourage increased youth volunteer activities.

Japanese Case Study: Kamakura Junior High School

Kamakura Junior High School, a prestigious public school affiliated with Yokohama National University, piloted the Ministry of Education's reforms three years prior to nationwide implementation in 2001. Kamakura Junior High offers a prototype service-learning course that meets one session or period per week, with a total of twenty-five periods, or fifty hours per semester. The class is not teacher directed and students are held responsible for

establishing their own projects and goals. At the end of the semester, students create summary presentations about their projects, which they exhibit to classmates and teachers. No grades are given; instead, students receive performance evaluations.

Students are expected to evaluate community needs and create a solution or project to address those needs. In the 2001 academic year, many Kamakura students chose to visit nursing homes, thus responding to a particularly prominent community concern in Japan: the growing number of elderly people in proportion to the younger generations who will care for them. As a result of declining birth rates and longer life expectancies, the Japanese population is aging at a more dramatic rate relative to other countries. For example, persons aged sixty-five or older are expected to compose more than 32 percent of the population by 2050, almost double the current proportion. In contrast, the proportion in the United States, while also growing, is projected to be 21.7 percent by 2050.¹³

Students initially visited the nursing homes to observe any problems that needed to be addressed. Students then planned activities and goals, often having to modify these as they worked with elderly persons firsthand. Teachers encouraged students not to be disheartened if an activity was not immediately successful; the idea was for students to learn from their mistakes. A number of problems might have been prevented if students had used the social sciences to research and evaluate the interests and abilities of elderly persons. For example, one group of students created a ring toss that was intended to be a form of physical activity. Students, however, were "shocked" when one patient fell over in her wheelchair while attempting to toss a ring. After gaining a better understanding of the physical abilities of elderly persons at the nursing home, the students reevaluated their goals and decided that making origami and learning about "old Japan" were more practical goals. The use of social science methodology would also have been helpful; students,

Internet Resources for Service Learning

These Internet resources provide useful explanations and examples to guide educators through the process of implementing service learning. Ideally, teachers should involve students in the process of choosing service-learning projects.

www.mssa.sailorsite.net/curric2.html
Maryland's service-learning curricula, curriculum materials.

www.ehhs.cmich.edu/ins/serv
Definitions, descriptions, and source-book for service learning.

www.learningindeed.org/index_mac_ie.html

Learning In Deed. A web tool that helps teachers become informed about and more involved in service learning.

www.nationalservice.org
"The Corporation for National and Community Service engages Americans of all ages and background in service to help strengthen communities through Ameri Corps, Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve."

www.learnandserve.org
Learn and Serve. Provides information about service learning.

www.nhusd.k12.ca.us/Instruction/SL_handbook/links.html
Links to various service-learning web-sites.

www.nhusd.k12.ca.us/Instruction/SL_handbook/SL_index.html
Offers a description of service learning, as well as examples and other useful information.

for instance, could have interviewed the staff at the nursing home and researched appropriate activities. Service learning is still a new requirement in Japan. Clearly, its connection with the curriculum will become stronger as the government and teachers establish standards and goals.

Service Learning in Maryland

In contrast to Japan, education in the United States is more decentralized, with most educational authority residing within state government. Although many public and private school districts around the country require community service participation for graduation, Maryland was the first and remains the only state that has introduced such requirements on the state level. Each school district in Maryland chooses its own service-oriented program, which then must be approved by the state schools superintendent. In some Maryland school districts, students are required to conduct individual community service projects. Most Maryland school districts, however, integrate service-learning requirements with "existing curriculum to help students use their academic skills to solve real community problems."¹⁴

Maryland Case Study: Bonnie Branch Middle School, Howard County
Bonnie Branch Middle School in Howard County, Maryland, is recognized for having a model service-learning program that is well integrated with the school's curriculum. Kayleen Reese, a social studies teacher at Bonnie Branch Middle, directed a recent notable service-learning project called "Have a Heart for the Homeless." The project was created by John Sharbaugh, a teacher of English at the same school, and was given the Unger Award as an exemplar of outstanding service learning. It was also featured on the Maryland Student Service Alliance's web homepage.¹⁵ A primary goal of the "Have a Heart for the Homeless" project is for students to "demonstrate every individual's role in affecting positive change" with a motto that "Kids CAN make a difference!"¹⁶

The indirect project focused on helping homeless people by donating items through a partnership with the local homeless shelter ("Grassroots"). Through the social studies, students analyzed how individuals and groups can bring about civic improvement. For example, students analyzed "Shelter Boy," a video about a boy whose family becomes homeless after a tornado destroys their house. The group also invited a guest speaker from the local homeless shelter and learned how their project could help people in need. The speaker helped dispel myths about homeless people being drug addicts or lazy. The students also learned that even the affluent area they lived in, Howard County, had homeless and needy people.

Students wrote essays for the local newspaper, school broadcasts, and the PTA newsletter, demonstrating the interdependence of quality writing and the social studies. Students were required to state a thesis or purpose and offer compelling evidence. One eighth grader wrote: "I am glad I helped in the service-learning project. I feel good that I can help others have a better life." Reflection was promoted through discussions and brief written responses to prompts, such as "What could you do to help a boy like the one in the video?" In addition, the donations were inventoried and graphed by students to determine which class collected the most items and would gain a "reward."¹⁷

The project highlighted some of the benefits of combining service learning with social studies. Students said they learned not to blame homeless people for their circumstances. They now understood that sudden loss of jobs, a death in family, or natural disasters can cause people to become homeless. Students also learned that it is important for community members, including children, to become involved in helping others.

Comparisons: Service Learning in Maryland and Japan

Both Japan and Maryland mandate service learning as a means to promote civic virtue in students. Unfortunately,

the ideals of service learning are not realized in Japan or in many schools in the United States because clear connections are not made with the curriculum and learning outcomes. In Japan and Maryland, the governments require service learning in schools in order to increase student participation and understanding of democratic citizenship. But are students truly learning about and appreciating citizenship when they are forced to do so in an undemocratic manner? Service learning has the potential to make the curriculum real and relevant. "When the service itself is a challenging and productive activity, it instills in students a real fire for learning. But when service amounts to busywork, it becomes just another classroom assignment."¹⁸ The case study from Japan exhibits some of the pitfalls of service learning when it is not integrated with social science methodology or other curriculum areas to promote learning. Ultimately, Japan

and the United States desire to promote a stronger sense of citizenship and humanity through service learning, but both countries should carefully examine the methodology and goals of service learning. ■

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