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# Teaching Courage: Service Learning at Pathway School

Michelle D. Ioele

Anne L. Dolan

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Joan Bacon is Assistant Professor of Special Education at Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota and has served as a teacher and director of special education programs. Larry Brendtro is Professor of Special Education at Augustana and Co-Editor of JEB-P.

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Michelle D. Ioele and Anne L. Dolan

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*This paper was awarded the Trieschman Prize for contribution to the literature of child and youth care practice in a competition sponsored by Albert E. Trieschman Center. The authors describe a successful "service club" program serving adolescent boys with social, emotional, and learning problems who reside at the Philadelphia's Pathway School.*

Helping people boosts me up. It makes me feel real good inside.

— Al-Hasson Thomas, age 15

**T**roubled children are rarely afforded the opportunity to view themselves as valuable and worthy. Because they are often in the role of care-recipients, they are not challenged to be, nor do they see themselves as capable of being, caregivers. Although many child and youth programs seek to provide these opportunities, a systematic and effective program for doing so has been lacking.

The service-learning program which began three years ago at Pathway School was not the brainchild of the authors, but rather a result of the children themselves demanding a chance to make a difference. For youth whose academic and social failure has led to low self-esteem and feelings of powerlessness, service learning experiences have proven to be particularly beneficial. Through participation in volunteer community service projects, they developed a positive self-image and confidence in their ability to create change.

Feeling good about oneself is a central component of a full and happy life. Regardless of one's financial, social, or educational position in society, positive self-esteem is necessary in order to develop as a healthy human being.

Many people are desperately searching for a sense of self-worth. Often, they concentrate on what they can purchase, earn, manipulate, or bargain for, instead of looking for a way to be of value to others. We know that humans have an innate need to be needed. Children do not need to be taught to give, but, rather, need to be taught how to give. Service learning teaches these skills and provides children the opportunity to explore what is unique about themselves and what they have to offer.

Service learning is a process of self-discovery. This discovery occurs in two ways. Through experiencing success in helping others, children learn to view themselves differently. Recognizing that they have gifts which are of value to others nurtures feelings of pride and positive self-esteem. Children begin to view themselves as capable of challenges which they had never before thought were within their reach. There is growing recognition of the benefits of service learning and an emerging knowledge base about the creation of effective service learning programs (Conrad & Hedin, 1986; Bird, 1988).

In addition to the discovery within, children involved in service learning receive feedback from others which helps to reinforce a positive self-image. The gratitude of those who receive the children's help, the respect of adults, and the admiration of peers has a powerful impact. Such recognition from significant others serves to confirm their new self-image and their value to others.

## **STRENGTHS VERSUS WEAKNESS**

Find another's gifts, contributions, and capacity. Use them. Give them a place in the community.

— McKnight (1989)

When troubled children enter our programs, the usual professional response is to evaluate them to determine their weaknesses. But focusing on lack of skill inadvertently reinforces a child's negative self-image. Programs grounded in a child's limitations fail to engage the child's strengths in the efforts towards growth. A service learning program provides children the opportunity to discover, develop, and use their strengths toward this end. Successful service learning involves the input and choice of the child. If children feel forced into performing tasks with which they feel uncomfortable or incapable, they will become resistant. What may appear to be disinterest may really be the child's attempt to avoid yet another failure. When children are given the opportunity to use their strengths, their enthusiasm and energy will be devoted fully to the project, and they will begin to view themselves as competent.

Tim is a 16-year-old boy who has a learning disability and suffers from hyperactivity. He has experienced a great deal of failure, both in and out of the classroom. Tim does very few things well because he can rarely stay on a task long enough to learn basic skills or to see an activity through to the end. However, one area where Tim excels is in the kitchen. Tim both enjoys and displays a talent for cooking. When the service club began making casseroles for the homeless, Tim was an eager and valuable participant. His moment of glory came when the head cook at the shelter asked him if he would be able to come and assist her with preparing meals. Each of the members had been given business cards containing his name and club insignia. As Tim handed the cook his card, he beamed with pride. He was experiencing, perhaps for the first time in his life, that, in spite of his failures, he had something valuable to offer to others.

This student's skills were recognized before he became involved in this project. How-

ever, many other children are unaware of what strengths they do possess. They have become accustomed to viewing themselves from the perspective of what they cannot do. Therefore, projects must be designed not only with the recognized strengths of its members in mind, but also must allow for the discovery and development of previously untapped strengths. A child who has never been given the opportunity to plan a project may turn out to possess organizational skills far beyond expectations.

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It's better to show pictures of what kings, travelers, and writers looked like before they grew up, or grew old, because otherwise it might seem that they knew everything from the start and were never young themselves.

— Janusz Korczak

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Tony appeared at the first service club meeting uninvited. Staff had not selected him because they knew he had great difficulty being serious in group situations with his peers. However, Tony not only dedicated himself to the meeting topic, but also he subsequently attended every meeting and offered constructive ideas and opinions. He soon became an invaluable member of the group. If staff had acted on their original impulse to ask Tony to leave that first meeting, they would have been shortchanging him and the entire service club. We have since learned to expect surprises.

## **POWER VERSUS HELPLESSNESS**

It's better to show pictures of what kings, travelers, and writers looked like before they grew up, or grew old, because otherwise it might seem that they knew everything from the start and were never young themselves.

— Janusz Korczak (1923)

Children are continually in search of ways to grow up quickly and to start making adult decisions. They desperately want control and power over their own lives, but the adults in their world often will not allow this type of independence.

Children in care experience even greater

control over their lives by adults. Teachers, parents, social workers and doctors make all major decisions for them. Troubled children are often placed in programs where they are bombarded with adult expectations.

Many children in residence feel anger and bitterness toward the adults who placed them away from their families. Some of these children feel the need to habitually challenge and fight the system, in hopes of exhibiting some control over their lives. The

feeling of helplessness is both frightening and frustrating for them. The quest for power and control often manifests itself in negative ways such as gangs, truancy, stealing, or substance abuse. Troubled young persons cry out for control and power, but are seldom included in the decision-making process that guides their lives. They get the message clearly: you are incapable of making responsible decisions.

When our service club was first being formed, the children and adults had many doubts. Once they had experienced success in an initial project, they recognized they could make a difference in someone's life or in their environment. It is a major victory for children in care to realize their own power to create change.

As Halloween approached, the service club decided to raise money for UNICEF. They distributed collection boxes to local businesses and restaurants, dressed in costume to collect at a local grocery store, and organized the younger children to trick or treat for UNICEF while collecting candy. The following morning, everyone gathered to empty the cartons and count the money raised. All the members were amazed and excited to find that their original goal of \$30 was exceeded by almost \$200. It was difficult to believe that a handful of

people could do so much in so short a period of time. When the coins were converted into a money order for \$225, the group studied the material sent by UNICEF to learn what that amount could mean to the recipients. When it was discovered that the amount raised by the project was enough to purchase a well for a drought-stricken community in a foreign country, the group realized what a powerful impact they had made.

After being involved in several projects, and seeing the difference they can make, children start to place higher expectations on themselves. With the realization that they have the power to create change comes the responsibility to act on that power. As they develop feelings of competence in helping others, they encourage others to become involved.

Service clubs allow children to be in control of the meetings and projects. In this way, they learn to take responsibility for everything from choosing the project to seeing it through to completion.

Corey and Joe proposed that the service club sponsor a dance to raise funds. The group agreed that it was a wonderful idea. When the members looked to staff to assign duties and work out the details, the adults directed the questions back to the two members who had originally proposed the idea. These boys quickly and eagerly assumed leadership and assigned tasks to all present, including the adults. Planning for refreshments was handled by two members, decorations by three others, and so on. At the dance itself, the members collected admission, sold chances, and served food and drink. Corey and Joe acted as disc-jockeys and provided an evening of entertainment for all. During the following week, staff and students alike remarked to Corey and Joe how much they had enjoyed their dance.

When given the opportunity to control the projects and become the decision-makers, the club members are confronted with their own power. Service learning provides positive ways for exerting influence, enabling youth to discover that they have the power to make a difference in their world.

## **WORTHINESS VERSUS WORTHLESSNESS**

To mean something in the world is the deepest hunger of the human soul.

— Platon (1968)

Often, children in care become convinced that they are unworthy of respect and undeserving of praise. They see themselves as damaged goods, having little or no value in a world which stresses excellence. Their counterparts in the public schools receive recognition for academic and athletic success, areas where many troubled children find only failure. Searching for value and meaning in their life often leads them into negative behavior because this may be the only area where they can achieve status and gain acceptance. A student who is last in his class may find the opportunity to be number one by becoming the leader of a gang. For many children who are struggling to find a sense of self-importance, a bad reputation is better than no reputation at all.

Recognition for positive behavior, for helping others, is a cornerstone of service learning. Children who previously saw themselves as having nothing to contribute find that others value the simple gift of their time. They learn that by spending an hour with a senior citizen, they are improving the quality of a human life. Youth who have been rejected time and again are welcomed with anticipation by people who are desperate for companionship.

The members had been collecting used toys for two months and had spent many hours cleaning, repairing, and wrapping them. They were to be delivered to a group of disabled pre-schoolers at a holiday party sponsored by the club. The event turned out to be well worth the months of preparations and hard work. Club members helped the pre-schoolers make decorations, break a piñata, and play "Pin the nose on Santa." The gifts were given, on Santa's knee, to each of the 50 children. All of the members, including Santa himself, were surprised by the happiness they saw reflected in the children's eyes as a result of their efforts. Afterward, however, something really surprising happened. The teachers who worked in the pre-school came up to the

Recognition for positive behavior, for helping others, is a cornerstone of service learning. Children who previously saw themselves as having nothing to contribute find that others value the simple gift of their time.

members and expressed their appreciation for the party, the toys, and most of all the time that the young people had spent with their group. They pleaded with the members to return and informed them that they were welcome at any time. After many "thank you's," the group piled into the vans for the ride home. The conversation that took place during the ride was one that the staff had never heard before. In a tone of awe, members were sharing with their peers the comments that the teachers had made, and many repeated in disbelief the requests to return that they had received. These children had received feedback many times from off-campus visits, often in the form of requests not to return or as warning to improve their behavior. For some of them, this was the first time that anyone had ever expressed such appreciation for their time.

What happened that day was a beginning for the members, a first step toward understanding their value and importance as human beings. Once these children realized the significance of their actions, they began to view themselves as noble and worthy. This view was reinforced by peers and adults who expressed admiration for what the members were doing. A letter written to each child by the school's executive director contained the following:

"I just wanted to take a moment to let you know how important I think what you are doing is for everyone concerned.... Your behavior and planning and organization can serve as a model, so that perhaps more of us can get involved in helping others and thereby helping ourselves."

## GIVING VERSUS DEPENDENCY

...idealism — and generosity of spirit — is a natural part of childhood.

— Coles (1988)

Many troubled children spend their lives being cared for by a variety of individuals, agencies and institutions. Their basic physical needs are met, and the programs attempt to provide for their educational, emotional, and social needs. Their neediness has been magnified and restated in many ways. The underlying message is that their primary role is to receive care from others. McKnight (1989) states that “being a service recipient teaches people that their value lies in their deficiencies, not in their capacities.”

Although there is a certain sense of security in being taken care of, children begin to feel restless, and they are no longer content with merely having their basic needs met. Children are energetic and possess an innate desire to get involved in the activities around them. They are naturally curious and inventive, motivated and desirous of success.

Service learning challenges care recipients to assume the new and unfamiliar role of giving care. Professionals are often guilty of placing limits on the children with whom they work instead of “demanding greatness.” Discouraged children must be given the courage to envision themselves as capable of great things. Because the rewards of their energies are immediate, caring soon becomes fashionable (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & VanBockern, 1990).

The service club regularly visits a city shelter for the homeless called Trevor’s Place. Most visits consist of delivering casseroles and spending time with the children who live there. On one visit, we saw a number of homeless people sitting on steam vents in the surrounding neighborhood. We felt badly that we had nothing to offer them and decided to bring along some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on our next trip. As we packed the vans on the day of our next visit, sandwiches included, Alex asked if he could bring along an old blanket of his to offer to one of the homeless people

Although there is a certain sense of security in being taken care of, children begin to feel restless, and they are no longer content with merely having their basic needs met.

on the street. Staff agreed to his request, and upon hearing this, another of the boys ran into his room and returned with his blanket.

Both of these boys had read about Trevor Ferrell, the boy for whom the shelter was named, and of his first encounter with the homeless, when he urged his parents to drive him to center city Philadelphia to deliver his extra blanket (Ferrell, 1985). What makes the actions of these two boys remarkable, however, is that they themselves come from impoverished backgrounds. A blanket is one of their few possessions and yet, in the role of care-giver, they viewed themselves not as the needy, but the needed.

When children become aware that there are people who are more needy than they, their focus changes from self-preoccupation to concern for others. Taking on the new role of care-giver is often accompanied by a re-evaluation of their own needs. When they recognize that they are capable of giving care, children also begin to view themselves as less in need of others’ care. In the role of care-giver, children see themselves as strong, powerful, and worthy.

That same evening, as we left Trevor’s, we intentionally drove through the most desolate part of the city. We still had sandwiches to give, and we were searching for someone who might appreciate some food on a cold December night. As we approached a dark intersection, Tim cried out from the back seat of the van that there was a homeless person on the corner. He grabbed a sandwich and climbed out the back door, running over to where an old woman sat. She clearly had all her worldly possessions surrounding her: an old shopping cart, a wooden stool, and other items that had been scavenged from the sidewalks. As Tim nervously approached her, asking if she would like a sandwich, she displayed a toothless grin and answered yes. He handed her the sandwich and, not knowing what else to say, ran back

to the van. The others questioned him, wondering what he had said, what she had said, and whether or not he had been frightened. But Tim said very little. He just sat quietly — and smiled.

It is not difficult to understand what Tim was feeling that night. He was experiencing emotions with which we, as child and youth professionals, are quite familiar. The same desires that motivate us to reach out to the children in our care are present in every human being, young and old. In our work, we have the opportunity to experience the satisfaction of giving every day. We also have the responsibility to offer that same opportunity to our children.

*Michelle Ioele was a residential counselor and Anne Dolan was co-ordinator of service learning and recreation at the Pathway School, Jeffersonville, Pennsylvania. Both are currently continuing advanced education, and Dolan is an advisor to the service program at Pathway. They dedicate their paper to the memory of Al-Hasson Thomas, whose brief life continues to impact others.*

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