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Transforming Service Learning: An Argument for the Radical Inclusion of Young People

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While much has been written delineating the reasons for supporting service learning, rarely have students' views been included. As a result of creating collective dialogues with young people, this article presents service learning from their perspective. Further, the methodology by which young people could be heard is put forth as a tool for bringing service learning to a new level.

Advocates for school reform and youth program specialists we endorsed service learning as a way to reconnect youth to e community, provide needed service in urban areas, and help students become active learners and problem solvers (ASLER, 1993; Hedin, 1987; Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Nathan & Kielsmeier, 1991; Perrone, 1993). As a pedagogical strategy, service learning creates opportunities for learning that are experientially based and relevant to the world outside of the classroom. Much has aiready been written delineating the reasons for supporting service learning: from the academic to the prosocial, from policy to

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politics, from the theoretical to the empirical (Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996; Newmann & Rutter, 1983; Shumer & Belbas, 1996). In addition, many have suggested elements critical to a quality program, such as the duration of the experience, the importance of the reflection component, and the building of cooperative site relationships (Blyth, Saito, & Berkas, 1997; Shumer, 1997). However, relatively little has been written about how students view these programs, and the extent to which their views match or are different from those of the professionals who run them.

For the last three years we have been documenting the impact of participating in service learning among 1,400 middle school students from three urban and three suburban schools. We have collected surveys from students, teachers, program leaders, and site supervisors; observed service sites and reflection sessions; and conducted student interviews. To support greater student participation in the research, a Student Advisory Group was formed. Once a year for the last two years, three or four student representatives from each middle school participated in focused group discussions about service learning.

Why Include Young People in the Service Learning Dialogue?

Increasingly, researchers are including students in "empirical" dialogues (Bartolome, 1994; Eaton & Pougiales, 1993; Fusco, 1997; Nieto, 1994; Ogden & Claus, 1997). Why? For one, as I participated in these dialogues with students, I continued to learn how to create environments supportive of their leadership. I did not lead young people' into a desired or appropriate response. Rather, I asked questions and allowed students to create and re-create the —continued on page 31

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conversation. In doing this, we could take the conversation in new and interesting directions. We could explore what service learning meant to them, rather than what research has shown is important. Usually, they began asking questions of their own. As it turns out, students were in agreement with professionals on some central issues. They had a lot to say that was positive about service learning. But in this collaborative and non-threatening setting they were willing to take greater risks, offer valuable critiques of their programs and sites, and present challenges. Further, they moved beyond reporting or complaining about their experiences to developing new ideas for how service learning could be improved. Eventually, with markers in hand, they produced a collective view of what makes a "good" service learning program and a "good" service learning site. Involving students in creating a conversation about service learning allowed the research to go beyond identifying students' perspectives and opened up the possibility of taking service learning to a whole new level.

The Service Learning Backdrop

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) cited the particular program targeted by our study --- the Helper Model - as a good example of a service learning program. Designed for middle-school students, the Helper model of service learning proposes that a quality program actively involves students in meaningful activities that meet real community needs and provides students with opportunities to reflect on their community service experiences (Schine, 1989). These general principles advantageously allow for much diversity in the development of service learning programs. Students participate in service learning anywhere from ten weeks to four years. Some students work in daycare centers or schools for children with disabilities; others work with senior citizens, in parks, or in offices. Some students choose where they would like to work: others are assigned. Reflection sessions vary from ten-minute "chats" to 45-minute group discussions coupled with journal writing. The diversity of experiences helped fuel the conversations as students learned about the differences, as well as the similarities across schools and programs.

Students' Views of Service Learning

As a result of focused group discussions over the course of two group meetings, several questions are addressed here. What do students believe are the benefits of participating in the 'Helper Model' of service learning? How do students feel about mandatory service learning and the length of time required of participation? What characteristics of service learning programs do students think are important for maximizing their effectiveness? Four characteristics which they discussed include the variety of the experience, planning, support and feedback from the site supervisor, and reflection.

The Benefits of Service Learning

An ongoing criticism of project-based pedagogy is that it may fail to provide students with needed basic skills or rigorous academic training (Hatch, 1998). Others argue that academic gains should not even be a criteria for judging service learning (Harrington, 1992). Students recognized that the substance of learning was dependent on the activities engaged in at the site. Often, the service experience was interdisciplinary; always it involved communicating with new people.

At the end we gave them (the seniors) a gift. Our teachers came around and took pictures of us and then we made frames for them. We did the acronym poem using (the words) Friendship or Respect and then we wrote it with them. And one day we also read poetry with them and they told us how it related to them.

I think it helps also in history because when I went to the senior center a lot of them were there at that time. We'd get into a discussion and they'd tell us, instead of reading a book about history. I learned how to listen too.

I think it mostly helped us communicate with others.

I think you learn how to talk better because when you're talking to the little kids they have to understand it. When you're teaching math you can't use words like divisor or quotient because they won't understand.

More often service learning is supported as a methodology for enhancing personal and prosocial growth (Shumer & Belbas, 1996). It was clear to students that while they were helping others, they too were benefiting — a commonly accepted tenet of peer helping (Gartner & Riessman, 1994). Students explained the benefits derived from helping others as follows:

If you do something good for somebody you actually get paid back. Not physically but emotionally, you feel better about yourself.

In community service you get to know a lot of different things about yourself and the kids. You get to experience the different ways that they act, the different ways you act with them, how you work with them. Sometimes you might get frustrated with them and you have to learn how to control your temper.

Well, I think community service is very helpful to you like everybody was saying in the future but it's also helpful to you now. I'm not trying to be greedy or anything but it looks good on a high school application. So I'm doing it because it gives me satisfaction but I'm also doing it because it's good for the future and good for your academic records.

Students who worked with disabled children expressed learning to appreciate what they had otherwise taken for granted. The initial fear of meeting people who were different soon disappeared as attachments were formed. Students clearly recognized how they were learning by moving out of their comfort zones. They came to see that having a disability does not negate that "there's a real person underneath."

The Down Syndrome kids... they can't do certain things that we can. Like it's really hard for them just to squeeze a bottle of glue or to climb up the stairs or something that's really easy for us. But they made us feel really good because now we appreciate what we can do more.



The littlest things, which seem like nothing to us, seem like so fabulous to them. They were so fascinated with everything.

At first when we met them it was unusual because we usually didn't see people like that, like everyday. I just really wanted to help them and we did.

However, not all students were able to form positive relationships with the children, raising the question of whether service learning should be required of young people.

I know that the people after me didn't pay any attention to the kids. I felt bad for the kids because they were like all happy that I would go and I had to leave. But then when my friends would go in they would just sit there and they wouldn't help them, they wouldn't teach them.

Some just went to joke around and play with their friends instead of helping out the little kids.

Mandatory Service and the Duration of the Experience

"Forced volunteerism" is an issue of controversy among educators, parents, and policy makers. Data gathered from the surveys indicated that of 724 students, 32% did not think service learning should be required. Students who agreed that service learnig be a requirement felt that "if I had to choose it I probably wouldn't have but now that they chose it for us, I like it." They believed that if students just gave it a try they would really enjoy it. In fact, students who had service for only one semester, or visited their sites five to ten times, were disappointed. "It really wasn't fair because the second we were willing to do anything for them we had to leave." After learning that students participate in service learning anywhere from 10 weeks to four consecutive years, an eighth grade boy came to appreciate how his school operated. Only "the seniors have community service for the whole year, it gives you something to look forward to in the seventh grade."

Overall, students believed that service learning should be a part of the curriculum and agreed that programs should include at least six months of actual service. However, they also felt concerned that forcing people to do community service, particularly when it involved children, could be dangerous. They proposed that only the first 10 weeks be required, after which time students could decide whether they would continue. They also recommended providing students with site options. Choosing a service site might help ensure that young people were interested and more engaged in what they were doing. Some believed that students who could choose their sites would be happier and put forth their best efforts.



If you're in a place that you don't want to go then you're gonna show that you don't really want to be there. And the little kids or the elderly people will be the ones that suffer the most. I think that's wrong.

I think it's better to choose because if you don't you're gonna feel like you're forced to work there. If you pick then you say 'oh I want to take this. I'm gonna go out and do my best.'

However, students were split on whether choosing a site was a good strategy. Those who were not advocates of choice felt that "dealing with what you get" is a part of life. Further, self-selection would not ensure that the needs of the community were met.

If you don't want to work somewhere it at least gives you a chance to learn to work with other people better and to have a learning experience with something that you might not enjoy at first but learn to like afterwards.

It's like that's how you're gonna have to learn in society because there are gonna be some things that you're not going to enjoy but have to get used to. So that helps you in the real world.

If everyone gets to pick where they want to go, you can get 10 people at a daycare center and nobody at the geriatrics center (or vice versa).

Variety of the Experience

Students reported that through service learning they have the opportunity to learn in an environment that is both fun and rewarding. Their comments, such as the ones below, reinforce the increased emphasis being placed on experiential and project-based learning as part of the school reform agenda.

It's weird because you're having fun. It's something you really want to do and you're learning at the same time, and getting grades for it which is amazing.

I think that service learning is better than just like sitting down in the classroom and a teacher teaching you about service learning because you actually get the experience of what you're doing.

It's a very enjoyable experience, almost like a hobby.

I think in every community people should know what kind of services they can do and where they can go.

However, many who began service learning with unabated excitement sometimes got bored "because you're doing the same thing over and over again." They suggested that having a servicelearning partner with whom responsibilities could be rotated would allow for greater variety from week to week. Working with a peer can also foster collaboration and the development of new activities.

There were different times when I was with another girl and we got bored because we did stuff the same. But we had to learn how to teach them other games and just learn by doing different things.

Practitioners in our study agreed that a diversity of experiences was beneficial. In one school, students work with children in an educational setting, such as a preschool or elementary school, from the 5th through 8th grades. The school is currently developing an internship model for the 8th grade students that would provide a wider range of experiences from which they could choose.

Planning

Would planning activities to bring to the site help alleviate the tedium? Could students plan site activities over and above those required by the site supervisors? Students thought planning activities was too difficult. In many instances, this seemed a result of how much flexibility they had at the site.

It's just whatever the teachers want you to help them with.

For us, she had the schedule out and they planned everything. I'd get there and they'd already be doing an activity and I'd have to help them.

They have a real structured school thing so they want to get the kids used to it.

Every time I go we have free play, then snack, then circle time. When I ask, do you want me to plan some activities, they say 'no, we're going to do what we always do because we don't want the kids to get confused.'

Interestingly, students from one of the most successful programs of the six had more experience planning.

Every time we used to come back from the seniors, the next day we'd talk about it and have a whole class discussion about what we did, what we didn't like, what we wanted to improve and then we would write in our journals. After that maybe a day before we went there again we planned what we wanted to do.

Survey data from other parts of our study suggest that planning ways to improve their work at the site was key to the perceived benefits of service learning. Yet, most schools did not incorporate planning into the reflection time. Students eventually decided that having the time to plan different activities would reduce boredom and provide a more positive experience for everyone involved. However, time was needed to carry out planned activities — at least one hour of constructive time at the site.

Support and Feedback

A major recommendation by students was that site staff provide encouragement and constructive criticism and be available when help was needed. Some programs were fortunate enough to have located site supervisors who were actively involved in creating the service experience. When the relationship at the site works, students exhibit an enthusiasm for learning that goes unseen in many classrooms.

Where I go, the teacher tells me anything you want to do, feel free to tell me. So I plan it like a week before because I go every Thursday and I know already what they are going to do at that time, and if I want to add something to it I'm gonna have time.

However, positive adult relationships were not always formed. At times the middle school students held different positions from the adults on how to handle young children; at times, the adults were simply unavailable.

I think that sometimes the kids that are working in the daycare center have more patience than the adults that

work there. I found that if you just take the time to talk with them and play with them, and not try to force them to do more things that they can't comprehend that they will listen to you. They listened to me. They didn't even listen to the teachers.

It seemed that in our group a lot of people who worked there didn't even want to have patience. They'd be like 'just put him in time out chair.' No one sat down with him and said you can't do this and if you keep doing it you're going to go in time out chair. It seemed that once we started doing that not as many people went into time out.

We always did the same thing because when I would get there (the teacher) would go and work on planning her lessons, so it would just be free time. She said we were there to keep the children busy so that she could have time to plan a lesson.

The pedagogy and structure in place at education sites, such as daycare centers, were at times dissonant from students' expectations and own values. Authoritarian styles of discipline were particularly alarming to students from middle class backgrounds. An urban Latino youngster had a different perspective, however:

I think where I work it's better off if you're more strict with them because if you're light with them, like 'please can you sit down' they're gonna think you're playing around. But then when you're being serious 'go sit down over there' they sit down and shut up.

Reflection offers a structured time for critically discussing these issues as they arise.

Reflection?

Reflection has been heralded as a defining characteristic of service learning (ASLER, 1993; Commission on National and Community Service, 1993; Kendall, 1991). Recent findings suggest that "the field should be very cautious in implementing service programs that require or mandate so many hours of service in the absence of teaching methods that allow students to interpret and learn from the experiences they encounter" (Blyth, Saito, & Berkas, 1997). Often seen as the metacognitive bridge between service (action) and learning (cognition), reflection may include talking or writing "about what the student did and saw during the actual service activity" (Commission on National and Community Service, 1993, p. 15).

Do students think reflection is an important part of service learning? The topic of reflection rarely arose naturally from the discussion, and when it did, it was equated to journal writing. Is reflection/journal writing important? "We really didn't care about it because it didn't really help us at all." With further discussion we learned that reflection is better when students are sharing ideas and thoughts, and getting helpful tips and feedback. Writing assignments alone did not provide the type of sharing and feedback students wanted. While journal writing does "help us express ourselves," another student remarked during an interview, "It's like you're talking to yourself. I don't think you're gonna get any answers when you don't know what to do." As discussed below, the degree to which reflection is integral to the program's success will depend on the quality of the reflection activities themselves.

Critiques

The "professional" field of service learning has identified characteristics of the service experience that are related to positive outcomes. The National Helpers Network identified the following elements of a quality program:

- 1 service which continues for at least 10 weeks
- 2 a voice for youth in planning
- 3 guidance to provide students with the skills and understanding they will need to meet their responsibilities
- 4 a skilled adult facilitator
- 5 a clear understanding among young people, the school and placement site supervisors
- 6 training and ongoing reflection.

Did students corroborate the view of professionals? Yes, but with several critiques.

Students often feel alienated from school, finding curriculum disjointed from their everyday lives. Educators are increasingly exploring ways for making curriculum more meaningful, engaging, and relevant to life outside of the classroom. Here, students confirmed that service learning is both a worthwhile and exciting experience. They are gaining skills and attributes that they see as useful to them now and in the future and find it almost hard to believe that they are also having fun. Their recommendation that service learning last at least six months attests to their excitement. However, students insightfully noted that not all young people enjoy service learning. In cases where young children, and particularly those with disabilities are involved, students recommended that schools apply extra caution. A ten-week trial period might help young people take responsibility for the time they do spend in service learning.

In order to maximize success without sacrificing the needs of the community, students felt a variety of experiences was crucial. This theme emerged and re-emerged. Having a variety of activities, a choice of service site, and a variety of ages of people with whom they can work would help ameliorate boredom and maintain interest. Planning different activities to do at the site required flexibility. Students would need the willingness of the site staff to try something new and at least an hour of constructive time at the site to try and test their plan. Encouragement and constructive criticism from the site staff would help ensure that students could meet their responsibilities.

Yet, the youth often felt that the adults at the site were not supportive of them or the groups they served. Locating sites where people can be positive role models, as well as supportive and flexible in considering activities or actions, should obviously be a high priority. However, service learning occurs in the real world with real people and real issues. What seems important then, if not more important, is that young people have a space to address the issues that do arise and to inform the building of school-community partnerships.

Reflection offers a structured time for young people to participate at this level of discussion and decision-making. However, students did not see reflection as important to a "good" program. What seems to be a point at which students and educators part ways may actually represent the struggle to turn theory into practice. Students' viewpoints stemmed from the actual reflection activities in which they were engaged, often journal writing. But reflections that worked well incorporated multiple methods. Findings from the surveys indicated that students had favorable reviews of reflection when they learned new or better ways to work, were able to talk about their experiences and concerns at the site, and received feedback regarding those concerns. Journal writing may support reflective practice, e.g., the expression of feelings, but may not incorporate the type of feedback that will lead to improved action. In fact, key to the perceived benefits of service learning was whether students engaged in planning ways to improve their work. Extending the reflective dialogue towards action, planning was rarely incorporated into the reflection seminar, and in fact, may not be seen as necessary. Site activities are often predetermined by the nature of the site and scheduling. Students who work in a nursing home may arrive in time to serve lunch; students who work in a preschool may participate only in circle time. Conversely, when the project arises out of youth participating in creating it, planning and reflection are integral to the process. At this level, reflection arises from action, rather than operating as a separate entity - a point which Ogden and Claus (1997) stress. "This means not waiting to validate or reflect on experience until service action has taken place; instead, it means engaging service participants from the outset in thinking critically about their lives, communities, and world." (p. 74) As young people conduct community research, design and implement their service projects, reflective discussions and journal writing naturally arise from participants moved by the experience. Eaton and Pougiales (1993) make a similar observation. "For students, creative reflection and criticism depend on seeing themselves as central to their learning, a feat accomplished not by a teacher saying that something is 'student-centered' but through the experience of being at the center." (p. 51) Of course, allowing young people this level of responsibility is challenging. First, it requires us as adults to give up some of the control without losing our capacity as facilitators. Second, things may not go as we planned. We have to be ready and accepting of students picking up the ball and running with it, even if they are running in a direction other than the one originally intended. Third, if the voices of young people are going to be included in the dialogue, then adults must seriously consider their recommendations.

Conclusion

My experience both working as a researcher and working directly with young people, gives me a unique perspective in being able to recognize that traditional methodologies often do not create spaces that are supportive of the very attributes under study. In fact, it was striking to me how appreciative young people were of even this brief opportunity to speak and be heard, critique, and create new ideas. Students consistently wrote in their evaluation of these meetings comments such as, "I really enjoy speaking with people my age about stuff like this. I got to hear different opinions and I got to express mine. Thanks!" In fact, many recommended "longer meetings," even though they were three hours long. The meetings also had an impact on the teachers. They would later ask me questions such as, "What did you do with them? They couldn't stop talking about it." They were amazed to see the excitement and passion from their students created during our brief time together. This leads me to say confidently that as much as I am supportive of service learning programs I believe strongly that they be radically participatory and include young people in all phases of program development and evaluation. I am supportive of efforts such as these because they promote students to be active agents in constructing the environments in which they learn and develop. Here, we might find students developing decision-making and leadership abilities, in addition to what some call the "warm fuzzies." The inclusion of student critiques is what will take service learning to a new level.

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