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The community as lab for service learning

Joseph Ciaccio



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Education Digest, Jan 1999 v65 i5 p63(3)

The community as lab for service learning. *Joseph Ciaccio.*



Explore

Abstract: Teachers can teach students about community service by encouraging their actual participation in community development. This type of service learning promotes the self-esteem of the students and makes them aware of their values in the community. Service learning also improves social skills.

Article A53688756

led to grade-level achievement in reading, and parents are advised of their children's performance through a systemwide reporting process. From the first day of school, parents receive a steady flow of letters, and descriptions of the instructional and developmental scales, a correspondence continuing throughout the year.

Literacy Graph

Parents learn that assessments are given in September, January, and May, and that the first one is designed to coincide with the fall parent/teacher conferences, where parents review their child's starting IRL and DRL. They also receive the first comprehensive "literacy assessment profile" and a "literacy assessment graph," which defines unambiguously the goal of their child's annual program.

Parents can easily find the shaded area on the graph that indicates the minimum performance expected of all Bangor first-graders. Many students far exceed this level by the end of the year, and parents can follow their child's growth from the first assessment in September to the last in late May. In addition, quarterly report cards have been modified to record progress by means of the same performance descriptors as the literacy graph.

Inspired by the success of the literacy assessment team in first grade, a second-grade literacy assessment team was formed in 1993. The members understood that placing second-grade literature into levels would require different definitions from those used in first grade. Their challenge was compounded by the need to address multiple genres and higher levels of comprehension required in the curriculum. Once again, an examination of the beliefs and performance expectations that second-grade teachers bring to their reading instruction had to be established. And any assessment had to incorporate an extensive measure of comprehension and independent written responses.

Moreover, a connection with the first-grade assessment was imperative. After witnessing early developments in second-grade work, the first-grade literacy team quickly created a "transitional reading assessment" to help advanced first-grade readers bridge the gap to the second-grade program. In two years, the development of test protocols, piloting, and staff training were complete. Kits and rubrics were put into final form. And in September 1996 the second-grade assessment was under way and being enthusiastically endorsed. Today, Bangor teachers train other Maine schools in the use of their assessments.

Not surprisingly, the third-grade teachers soon took up the challenge of continuing the development of the assessment system. What is evolving is a seamless, continuous-progress performance assessment in reading that provides teachers with valid feedback on their instruction, that relates information about growth in achievement to parents in clear terms, and that reports the progress of the school system to the public. **ED**

The Community as LAB for Service Learning

By Joseph Ciaccio
From Social Education

THE eighth-graders from Suzanne Middle School are lined up in pairs in front of school, waiting eagerly for the policemen to stop a driver without a seat belt. When they do, two students approach the driver, who gets a well-rehearsed speech on seat-belt use. A small child in the back seat is offered cookies donated by a parent who owns a bakery, and toys donated by local merchants.

The children in this activity, who have prepared a pamphlet on seat-belt safety in four languages, hand their written words of wisdom to each amazed driver. They sent three requests to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to get enough bumper stickers to pass one out to each stopped driver. The kids went to the sheriff's office to get permission for this activity, and acted as "spokespeople" when local TV cameras appeared on the scene.

What a wonderful experience for these youngsters! They went back into school pumped up and enthusiastic about their important contribution to the community. They felt good about

themselves because they realized they can accomplish something of significance. They tested their inner resources and were victorious in trying to give a practical lesson in safety to 60 drivers.

Service learning is an exciting concept. Teachers can help students learn by using the community as a laboratory. Yet, far too many schools employ community service only as a sporadic activity when it should be an ongoing K-12 commitment.

The benefits of service learning for students are wide ranging. Students feel useful and may experience a sense of personal growth and enhanced self-

Joseph Ciaccio taught middle school for 31 years and is now an educational consultant. Reach him at 58 Ungua Rd., Massapequa, NY 11758 (phone: 516-541-0078). Condensed from Social Education, 62 (September 1998), from its supplement, Middle Level Learning, M12-M13. Published by the National Council for the Social Studies, 3501 Newark St., NW, Washington, DC 20016 (phone: 202-966-7940).

esteem by becoming more aware of their positive inner resources. Social skills may improve because so much of the process is a group effort. Critical thinking skills may also improve because the students are solving real-life problems.

Service learning also tends to be interdisciplinary—a whole experience that is greater than the sum of its parts—in sharp contrast to the fragmented, isolated, single-subject orientation of the learning process in most secondary schools. Moreover, many students become more interested in social studies when they better understand its relevance to the real world; community involvement thus results in enhanced learning.

Better Social Skills

One of the most meaningful outcomes of service learning is improving students' social skills. As a demonstration project, the students of Suzanne Middle School turned the school property into a drought-resistant landscape. They raised \$4,000 in bake sales to send representatives to Sacramento to testify in favor of a water conservation bill. The team effort resulted in another terrific sense of achievement when the bill became law.

As for critical thinking skills, service learning confronts students with community problems requiring kids to analyze, hypothesize, and synthesize information to solve a problem. Social studies teachers have available to them the Active Citizenship Today (ACT) program, a joint project of the Close Up Foundation and the Constitutional Rights Foundation using public-

policy issues to satisfy various content and critical-thinking aspects of the social studies curriculum. ACT prepares lesson plans on such topics as homelessness, crime, drugs, and violence.

The ACT project on crime was the focus of students in the Northside school district of Texas. These students gathered information on teen violence and interviewed legislators, politicians, and other community residents to determine causes behind increased crime. They observed value conflicts among various groups, considered constitutional issues like gun control, and identified pending bills worthy of their support. They put together and presented education programs on the topic for their school's younger kids.

Students don't always find schoolwork relevant. When I asked my honors class what satisfaction they received from school work, most indicated it wasn't meaningful to them. Service learning can enrich the social studies curriculum when students see the projects they are engaged in as genuinely productive.

An essential part of service-learning projects is recognition and positive attention for participating students. I was advisor to the Social Studies Club when students decided to "beautify" the school by attacking graffiti and cleaning up the courtyard. When the kids' achievements in "beautification" appeared in the local newspaper, they got recognition earned through hard work and eager spirits. Teachers can find a lot to like about service learning. Community action

programs can be fun and a nice change of pace from classroom learning. The master teacher will use service learning to entice non-academically minded students into the educational process. When all children are moving in the same direction, all part of the marvelous mainstream, teaching becomes a pleasure.

Service learning provided one of the genuine highs of my teaching career when the children in my school were asked to bring in food for the homeless. Since my class brought the most, the principal selected them to deliver the 22 boxes of food to the Interfaith Nutrition Network. At the homeless shelter, the kids stacked the food on the pantry shelves. On the bus trip home, one of my most difficult students jumped up and yelled, "Give me a C." The kids responded enthusiastically. "Give me an i," he yelled. He continued until all the letters of my name were spelled out.

What a great feeling! This kind of activity lets teachers relate to their students on a different level. You work with them. You're on the same side. There is likely to be more trust, less tension, and greater cooperation from students. Most of all, you, as the teacher, will cherish these golden moments as an anchor of personal satisfaction for the rest of your life.



Traditionally, schools function as isolated entities. They are part of the community, but kids rarely experience a sense of community while going through the motions from homeroom to the final bell that delivers them back to the world outside. Hopefully, service learning can bridge that gap.



Students of Great Neck North Middle School, on Long Island, are in a "Dare to Care" community program. Since 1993, they have collected clothes, food, and toys for families in need. They also helped the mayor's campaign to clean up litter in downtown Great Neck. The Dare to Care program teaches children compassion and concern for human dignity. Kids who learn these bedrock values on a systematic basis may some day be better parents, friends, and members of their communities.

Active and Caring

It's been written that future schools will prepare students for "not only a satisfying career, but enjoyment of family and friends, recreation, intellectual stimulation, physical and mental health, and ethical conduct." But what about being an active, involved citizen? Is this human endeavor so rare it doesn't even come to mind? Are our children destined to live their civic lives feeling as helpless and politically insignificant as many of the older generation appear to feel? After all, what can one person do?

We are moving in the direction of government by the very few, for the rich and wealthy (sorry, Abe). One solution is to teach children how to become active, caring citizens. Community involvement through service learning can affect students, teachers, and the community in profoundly positive ways. Its impact is emphatic and decisive and makes our immediate world a better place to live in. It has an essential role to play in preparing students for that time when the future of the world will be in their hands. **ED**

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Social Education, Sept 1998 v62 n5 pM12(2)

The community as a laboratory for student learning. (Middle Level Learning, September 1998, Issue 3) *Joseph Ciaccio*.

Abstract: Teachers should provide children with many opportunities to actively be involved in the education process. Service learning is an exciting concept in education yet many schools employ community service only as a sporadic activity. Teachers can encourage and help their students to learn by using the community as a laboratory for the classroom where children can test and apply their curriculum to real life situations from kindergarten through high school.

Article A21177155

THE COMMUNITY AS A LABORATORY FOR STUDENT LEARNING

Joseph Ciaccio

The eighth graders from Suzanne Middle School are lined up in pairs in front of their school. They wait eagerly for the policemen to stop a driver who is not wearing his seat belt. When they do, two students approach the bewildered driver, who finds himself the recipient of a well-rehearsed speech about the virtues of seat belt use. A small child in the back seat is offered cookies donated by a parent who owns a bakery, and toys donated by local merchants.

The children involved in this activity, who have prepared a pamphlet on seat belt safety in four languages (English, Spanish, Japanese, and Tagalog), hand their written words of wisdom to each amazed driver. They had written three requests to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (N.H.T.S.A.) to get enough bumper stickers to pass one out to each stopped driver. It was the kids who went to the sheriff's office to get permission for this activity. It was the kids who acted as "spokespeople" when local TV cameras appeared on the scene.

What a wonderful experience for these youngsters! These students went back into school pumped up and enthusiastic about their important contribution to the community. They felt good about themselves because they came face to face with the realization that they can accomplish something of significance. Fisk maintains that children should be actively involved in the education process.¹ This seat belt activity certainly accomplished that goal. They tested their inner resources and were victorious in their attempt to give "a practical lesson in safety" to sixty drivers.²

Service learning is an exciting concept

in education. Teachers can help their students learn by using the community as "a laboratory for the classroom where students can test and apply their curriculum to real life situations."³ Yet, far too many schools employ community service only as a sporadic activity when it should be an ongoing commitment from kindergarten through high school.

Service Learning Helps Students

The benefits of service learning for students are wide ranging. Students feel useful and may experience a sense of personal growth and enhanced self-esteem by becoming more aware of their positive inner resources. Social skills may improve because so much of the process is a group effort. Critical thinking skills may also improve because the students are solving real-life problems.

Service learning also tends to be an interdisciplinary activity—a whole experience that is greater than the sum of its parts. This is in sharp contrast to the fragmented, isolated, single subject orientation that comprises the learning process in most secondary schools.

Many students become more interested in social studies when they better understand its relevance to the real world. Community involvement thus results in enhanced learning.

Among the many positive outcomes of service learning, one of the most meaning-

ful is improving students' social skills. The students of Suzanne Middle School turned the school property into a "xeriscape," or drought-resistant landscape, as a demonstration project. They raised \$4,000 in bake sales to send representatives to Sacramento to testify in favor of a water conservation bill "that called for planting drought-tolerant shrubs and flowers as landscaping for public roads and buildings."⁴ The team effort put forth by these kids resulted in another terrific sense of achievement when the bill became law.

What about critical thinking skills? Service learning confronts students with community problems that require kids to analyze, hypothesize, and synthesize information in order to solve a problem. Social studies teachers have available to them the A.C.T. (Active Citizenship Today) program, a joint project of the Close Up Foundation and the Constitutional Rights Foundation,⁵ which uses public policy issues to satisfy various content and critical thinking aspects of the



Students in Williamsburg, Virginia, conduct a landscaping project.

Photo by Renee Bouchard, Close Up Foundation

social studies curriculum. A.C.T. prepares lesson plans on such topics as homelessness, crime, drugs, and violence.

The A.C.T. project on crime was the focus of students in the Northside district of Texas. According to Stephens, these students gathered information about teenage violence, and

interviewed legislators, politicians, and other community residents to assess the reasons for the increase in crime; noted the conflict of values among different groups; examined constitutional issues such as gun control; and identified pending bills that they wanted to support. They also prepared and presented education programs on the topic for younger kids at their school.⁶

Students don't always find schoolwork to be relevant. I was surprised when I asked my honors class what satisfaction they received from their school work, and most indicated that it wasn't meaningful to them. Rich maintains that "motivation needs replenishment."⁷ Service learning projects can enrich the social studies curriculum when students see the projects they are engaged in as genuinely productive.⁸

An essential part of service learning projects is recognition and positive attention for participating students. I was the advisor to the Social Studies Club when students decided to "beautify" the school by attacking graffiti and cleaning up the courtyard. When the kids' achievements in "beautification" appeared in the local newspaper, they received the recognition they had earned through their hard work and eager spirits.

Benefits to the Teacher

Teachers can find a lot to like about service learning. Community action programs can be fun and a nice change of pace from classroom learning. The master teacher will use service learning to entice non-academically minded students into the education process. When all children are moving in the same direction, as part of the marvelous mainstream, teaching becomes a pleasure.

Service learning provided one of the genuine highs of my teaching career when the children in my school were asked to bring in food for the homeless. Since my class brought in the most, the principal selected them to deliver the 22 boxes of food to the Interfaith Nutrition Network. Upon arrival at the homeless shelter, the kids opened the boxes and stacked the food on the pantry shelves. On the bus trip home, one of my most difficult students jumped to his feet and yelled, "give me a C." The kids responded enthusiastically. "Give me an I," he yelled. He continued until all the letters of my name were spelled out.

What a great feeling! This kind of activity allows teachers to relate to their students on a different level. You work with the students. You're on the same side. There is likely to be more trust, less tension, and greater cooperation on the part of the students. Most of all, you as the teacher will cherish these "golden moments" as an anchor of personal satisfaction for the rest of your life.

Service Learning and the Community

Traditionally, schools function as isolated entities. The school is part of the community, but kids rarely experience a sense of community while "going through the motions" from home room to the final bell that delivers them back to the world outside. Hopefully, service learning can bridge that gap.

The students of Great Neck North Middle School on Long Island are involved in a "Dare to Care" community program. Since 1993, they have collected clothes, food, and toys for families in need. They have also taken part in a campaign instituted by the mayor to clean up litter in the downtown area of Great Neck.

The Dare to Care program teaches children compassion and concern for human dignity. Kids who learn these bedrock values on a systematic basis may some day be better parents, friends, and members of their communities.

In describing schools of the future,

Sanderlin expresses her feeling that they will prepare students for "not only a satisfying career, but enjoyment of family and friends, recreation, intellectual stimulation, physical and mental health, and ethical conduct."⁸ I didn't see any reference to being an active and involved citizen. Could it be that this human endeavor is so rare that it doesn't even come to mind? Are our children destined to live their civic lives feeling as helpless and politically insignificant as many members of the older generation appear to feel? After all, what can one person do?

We are moving in the direction of government by the very few, for the rich and wealthy (sorry, Abe). One solution is to teach our children how to become active and caring citizens.

Community involvement through service learning can affect students, teachers, and the community in profoundly positive ways. Its impact is emphatic and decisive and makes our immediate world a better place to live in. It has an essential role to play in preparing students for that time when the future of the world will be in their hands. ❖

Notes

1. Edward Fiske, *Smart Schools, Smart Kids* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 246.
2. Larry Martz, *Making Schools Better* (New York: Times Books, 1992), 122-23.
3. Lillian Stephens, *The Complete Guide To Learning Through Community Service* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1995), 10.
4. Martz, 120.
5. Stephens, 60, 208-9. For information, contact the Constitutional Rights Foundation, 601 South Kingsley Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90005 or the Close Up Foundation, 44 Canal Center Plaza, Alexandria, VA 22314.
6. *Ibid.*, 60.
7. Dorothy Rich, *What Do We Say? What Do We Do?* (New York: Forge, 1997), 67.
8. Owenita Sanderlin, *Creative Teaching* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Corp., 1971), 170.

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