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# A New National Service Learning Program in the Netherlands Preliminary Evidence\*

## Introduction

Since 2006, the Department of Education in the Netherlands encourages the introduction of service learning programs at the level of secondary education. The goal of the programs is to promote civic-mindedness: civic engagement, awareness of values and norms, and active citizenship. Past studies of the effects of service learning programs in the USA, Canada and Australia have produced mixed results. While some studies claim that mandatory programs do not promote civic-mindedness, other studies do claim positive effects. The goal of the present study was to estimate the effects of mandatory service learning programs in the Netherlands on civic-mindedness.

Mandatory service programs could serve to reduce pre-existing differences in social values and tendencies to participate in voluntary associations. Those more inclined to volunteer in youth are more likely to be children of volunteers, have higher grades, are more religious, and describe themselves as more active, helpful, and are more involved in voluntary organisations. If participation in service learning programs is voluntary, it is likely that youth who are more likely to develop civic-mindedness anyway because of their background will participate. These youth are more likely to get engaged in voluntary associations, participate in politics in the absence of service programs at school.

Conversely, those who come from backgrounds that make them less likely to be engaged in community and political affairs in their adult lives will be less likely to participate in voluntary service programs at school. The effect of voluntary programs would then be to create differences between those from backgrounds that encourage

civic engagement and those from backgrounds that do not at an earlier age. Through voluntary service, youth develop 'habits of the heart' and get into social networks that make them accessible for voluntary associations in the future. Those who are less familiar with civic engagement because of a lack of participation in their home environment may learn to participate through the school's program. If the program is successful, their participation level will increase during and after the program. They will catch up with those who were already inclined to participate before the program.

Obviously, not all types of service learning programs are equally effective in fostering civic-mindedness. The effectiveness of service learning programs is likely to depend on several program characteristics, including responsibility of students in selecting a host organisation, the level of interaction with and the type of beneficiaries, embeddedness of service learning into the curriculum, and the quality of reflection.

The programs offered to students in the Netherlands vary widely in content, the level of supervision, integration in the curriculum and student reflection. The present study examined civic-mindedness among 2,491 students in secondary education in the Netherlands in a variety of programs from 34 different schools requiring service. At each school, students participated from classes that had completed the service learning and from a control group of classes that had not. 41.5% had completed a service learning program last year ( $n=1,034$ ).

## Satisfaction with service

An important precondition for the effectiveness of service learning programs is satisfaction among

students. It would be undesirable if the programs create aversion against civic participation among students. In addition, we expected that civic-mindedness is more likely to develop in programs that students like better. Our study revealed that general satisfaction with the program (“How do you look back on your service learning?”) was rather high: the average score was slightly higher than 8, on a scale from 2 to 10. Just 7% scored 4 or lower, 16.5% scored 6 and 76.4% scored 8, 9 or 10. We also measured satisfaction with seven different aspects of the program: feeling valued, useful, engaging in challenging tasks, having learned a lot, having used one’s talents, and the social atmosphere. The average level of satisfaction with these aspects of the program was slightly lower, but still rather high. Positive attitudes (8 or higher) ranged from slightly higher than 40% (for feeling useful) to slightly lower than 75% (for feeling valued).

In an analysis of determinants of satisfaction we found that students with prior volunteering experience found the service learning program more satisfying. We also found that giving students freedom of choice in location (where to do the service) and tasks (what to do during service) was associated with higher levels of satisfaction. Students with some or full freedom of choice for organisations and with full freedom of choice in tasks in their service program found the program more satisfying. Choice in organisations was more strongly associated with satisfaction than choice in tasks. As hypothesized, reflection in class on service learning experiences was also associated with higher satisfaction, though the effect is modest relative to the effects of freedom of choice and prior volunteering.

We also found that students who were engaged in service work are more satisfied. Controlling for the type of activities, there were no differences between students who completed their service in different sectors. Students who worked in health organisations were just as satisfied as students who worked with children, in advocacy groups or sports clubs.

We found that students who received a higher

grade for their service learning were more satisfied. Those who did not receive a grade are less satisfied. Finally, students who spent more hours than required are more satisfied with service learning as a whole.

## Service learning and civic-mindedness

We investigated the relationship between service learning programs and a series of indicators of civic-mindedness: generalised trust, civic values (combining scores on scales measuring altruistic values, empathic concern, postmaterialistic values, and perceived social norms to give and volunteer), civic skills (combining scores on scales measuring communication skills, organisational skills and self-esteem), social support (helping class mates with homework, talking with friends about personal problems), involvement in charitable causes (donating money) and involvement in politics (political interest and intention to vote). First we compared mean scores on these indicators of students who completed their service learning requirement with mean scores of students who had not completed service.

We found that students who had completed service scored significantly higher ( $p < .10$ ) on civic values, social support, involvement in charitable causes and involvement in politics than those who had not completed service. Differences in trust and civic skills were positive, but not significant. Next we controlled for differences between schools in a fixed effects regression. Differences in civic values, social support and involvement in charitable causes remained significant. The differences were not large, however. As a rule, differences between students who had completed service and students who had not were smaller than differences between non-religious and religious students or differences between students at the lowest and highest levels of education. Thus, service learning makes a significant but modest contribution to the development of civic-mindedness.

Overall, we found strong support for the hypothesis that students who were more satisfied with their service developed a stronger civic-mindedness. Controlling for satisfaction, differences between those who completed a service learning program and those who had not were not significant. This implies that the differences observed earlier between those who have completed a service learning program and those who have not are due to those with positive experiences. It is because most students have positive experiences with service that service promotes civic-mindedness.

### What kind of service learning programs are most effective?

In a series of regression analyses of civic-mindedness indicators on program characteristics (among those who completed service) we found a number of interesting results. Service work is associated with a higher level of social support behaviour, but not with other civic-mindedness indicators. Reflection in class is not associated with any of the civic-mindedness indicators. This finding suggests that current reflection activities are not effective and the quality of reflection needs to be improved. Solitary service was generally associated with lower civic-mindedness. Students whose service was not graded were more likely to provide social support to peers, and were more engaged in politics. A higher intensity of service (serving more hours per day) is associated with lower civic values scores and lower engagement in politics.

Students who volunteered beyond the program had stronger civic values, displayed more social support behaviour, were more strongly engaged in charitable causes and were more strongly engaged in politics than students who had not volunteered.

Satisfaction with the program is positively associated with generalised social trust (though marginally significant), civic values, social support behaviour and engagement in politics, but not with civic skills and with engagement in charitable causes. Including satisfaction with the program

reduces most of the effects of program characteristics on civic-mindedness.

Freedom of choice had a complicated relationship with civic-mindedness. When we did not control for satisfaction, students who had more freedom of choice did not seem to differ from students who had less freedom. However, when we controlled for satisfaction, those who had more freedom of choice in tasks actually had significantly lower civic values scores than those who had no choice at all. Phrased differently, no choice in fact promotes civic values, but this relationship was obscured by the lower satisfaction with service among those who had no choice. A similar finding we obtained for duration of service (serving throughout a longer period of time). Duration tended to have negative relationships with civic-mindedness, but without controlling for satisfaction these relationships were not significant.

### Conclusion

Most students (77%) reported positive or very positive experiences during service. This is a positive result: only a minority of students is not satisfied with the mandatory service learning programs that currently exist in the Netherlands. Mandatory service makes a modest but positive contribution to the development of civic values, social support, engagement in charities, and engagement in politics.

Students who have completed a service learning program score higher on these indicators of civic-mindedness than students from the same schools which have not completed the program. Students with experiences in volunteering beyond the program were not less likely to benefit from service learning than students with no prior experiences in volunteering. Moreover, engagement in charities was higher among students who volunteered beyond the program than among students who did not. The relationships of service with several other outcomes were also more positive among those with prior volunteering experience, but

they were not significant. Thus, it seems that present service learning programs in the Netherlands amplify pre-existing differences in civic-mindedness.

We find that satisfaction with the program is a crucial factor associated with civic-mindedness. Students who have completed the program are more civic-minded when their experiences with service were positive. Prior volunteering is associated with higher satisfaction of the program.

An important source of satisfaction for students is responsibility in selection of a host organisation and a set of activities. But freedom may be abused. Some students used their freedom to select organisations that they were already participating in. Some even described relatively effortless tasks that they would have done anyway such as babysitting nieces and nephews or playing card games with their grandparents. Indeed for some outcomes, freedom of choice had negative effects. For teachers, it is important to guide students to organisations and tasks that provide positive and meaningful experiences. A crucial issue of course is whether the relationships observed in this study are causal effects of service on civic-mindedness, and if so, how long the effects of service will persist. In the present study, students reported on service learning activities in

the past year. Despite our efforts to control for selection-effects, it may be that the differences observed in the present study are the result of selection processes. Also they may be short-lived, and they may disappear after one or two more years. Future research needs to follow up students who have completed service learning programs for a longer period of time to address this issue.

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## **Un nouveau programme national d'apprentissage par le service communautaire aux Pays-Bas – Premiers éléments d'information**

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Depuis 2006, aux Pays-Bas, le ministère de l'Education encourage l'introduction de programmes d'apprentissage par le service communautaire au niveau de l'enseignement secondaire. L'objectif en est de promouvoir le civisme, autrement dit l'engagement citoyen, la conscience des normes et des valeurs et une citoyenneté active. Les précédentes études conduites sur les effets de ces programmes aux Etats-Unis, au Canada et en Australie ont abouti à des conclusions mitigées. Si certaines études mettent en évidence que ces programmes obligatoires ne promeuvent pas l'esprit citoyen, d'autres revendiquent leurs effets positifs. L'objectif de la présente étude était d'évaluer les effets sur le civisme des programmes

obligatoires d'apprentissage par le service communautaire aux Pays-Bas.

Aux Pays-Bas, les programmes proposés aux élèves sont très variables du point de vue de leur contenu, du niveau de supervision, de leur intégration dans le cursus et de la réflexion des élèves. La présente étude a examiné le niveau de civisme de 2 491 élèves du secondaire suivant les divers programmes de 34 écoles exigeant un engagement communautaire. Dans chacune des écoles, les élèves participant à l'étude étaient issus d'une part de classes ayant terminé leur cycle d'apprentissage par le service communautaire et, d'autre part, d'un groupe de contrôle constitué parmi des classes n'ayant pas encore suivi cet apprentissage.

## Ein neues nationales Programm für Service Learning in den Niederlanden Vorläufige Ergebnisse

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Seit 2006 fördert das Bildungsministerium der Niederlande die Einführung von Service Learning-Programmen (Lernen durch Engagement) in Sekundarschulen. Das Ziel der Programme besteht darin, staatsbürgerliches Bewusstsein zu fördern: staatsbürgerliches Engagement, Bewusstsein für Werte und Normen sowie aktive Bürgerschaft. Frühere Studien zur Wirkung von Service Learning-Programmen in den USA, Kanada und Australien haben unterschiedliche Ergebnisse gehabt. Während manche Studien behaupten, das Programme das staatsbürgerliche Bewusstsein nicht fördern, besagen andere Studien, dass es positive Wirkungen gibt. Das Ziel der vorliegenden Studie bestand darin, die Wirkungen von Service Learning-

Pflichtprogrammen auf das staatsbürgerliche Bewusstsein in den Niederlanden zu bewerten.

Die für Schüler in den Niederlanden angebotenen Programme unterscheiden sich stark in ihren Inhalten, dem Umfang der Supervision, ihrer Einbettung in den Lehrplan und der Reflexion durch die Schüler. Die vorliegende Studie untersuchte das staatsbürgerliche Bewusstsein bei 2.491 Schülern von Sekundarschulen in den Niederlanden in einer Vielzahl von Programmen an 34 verschiedenen, dieses Engagement fordernden Schulen. An jeder Schule nahmen Schüler aus Klassen, die ihr Service Learning beendet hatten, sowie aus einer Kontrollgruppe von Klassen teil, bei denen dies nicht so war.