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Developing Youth Voice in Service Learning Projects

Jacklyn A. Bruce

The Pennsylvania State University, jab743@psu.edu

Nicole S. Webster

The Pennsylvania State University, nsw10@psu.edu

Tracy S. Hoover

The Pennsylvania State University, tsh102@psu.edu



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Developing Youth Voice in Service Learning Projects

Abstract

A qualitative study was conducted to collect information on youth and service learning to provide a template for educators' use when incorporating service learning activities into their curriculums. Findings included that teens were able to articulate a definition of service learning and identify service activities. Most felt they had a voice in planning and implementation and saw adults as key in evaluating projects. However, some felt that adults have too great a voice in the planning stages. Recommendations include professional development for adults on working with teens and evaluating current programs to make certain that youth voice is present.

Jacklyn A. Bruce

Assistant Professor

jab743@psu.edu

Nicole S. Webster

Assistant Professor

Nsw10@psu.edu

Tracy S. Hoover

Associate Professor

Tsh102@psu.edu

The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania

Introduction

Given the rising number of organizations requiring young people to complete service learning activities, it is imperative that educators know if these programs are facilitating the process of learning and development. Because a standardized template does not exist for the implementation of service learning activities, it is difficult to measure how individuals (youth and adults) perceive service learning within youth organizations. Research was conducted to collect preliminary information with the intent to provide a template for educators to use when incorporating service learning activities into their curriculums.

What the Researchers Found

The research team conducted two separate focus group interviews with a pool of young people currently involved in service learning projects through formal academic programs and in extra curricular organizations. In this case, respondents were able to articulate or identify:

- Effective service learning programs including working with participants or community members, educating everyone involved, and learning outside the classroom.
- Service learning is an activity done for the greater good.
- Service learning is a method of learning and teaching with the greatest intent to help, educate, and support other people.
- Young people should have an active and consistent voice in the planning and implementing of service learning activities.

Participants identified service learning activities they were currently involved in or had been a part of in the past years. They identified these activities as annual events that were incorporated into the standard framework of "service" activities done within their school or community organizations.

All respondents felt that their roles in the planning of service learning activities within their organizations were voluntary. They described their involvement as student leaders who organize, plan, and implement the service learning activities or programs. Their comments supported the idea that young adults have the responsibility to be leaders "who step forward and volunteer" and are the voices to drive service related activities.

However, some respondents expressed that in some cases, adult participation overshadowed participation of youth. In these cases, youth perceived adults as "taking over" the ideas of the youth and not allowing the young adults to have a voice in any major decisions. They believed that the adults gave them limited amounts of power and limited access to information in order to make decisions. In these cases, they felt that youth and young adults do not have a voice are not a part of the process.

Respondents emphasized their leadership role in service learning activities as individuals who evaluate the effectiveness and quality of the program. They played an active role in data summary and discussing how to make changes. Although they had expressed the role of adults as a hindrance in other parts of the service learning program, they positively acknowledged the role of adults during this process. The young adults realized the importance of the adult voice during this process despite their interpretation of adult involvement in other parts of the service learning process.

Tools for the Future

The findings of this study emphasize how important it is for educators to incorporate youth voice in the decision-making process of activities within their respective youth organizations. Young people should be active participants who are heard and valued within all aspects of the program.

Adult leaders of youth should be provided with educational opportunities that will maximize their effectiveness as educators. Volunteers should be trained in methods of working with youth that will emphasize the importance and positive impact of youth voice and leadership. Several studies provide evidence that those youth organizations successfully retaining older adolescents offer increased chances to participate in leadership, decision making, and relevant service activities (Kirshner, & O'Donoghue, 2005; Pittman, Tolman, & Yohalem, 2005; & Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005).

Similar to their adult counterparts, youth should receive educational opportunities in working with different types of people and in various methods or techniques for positive decision making. Simultaneous training will strengthen the framework in which all individuals are working from within the organization.

Educators of all types, formal and non-formal, need to ensure that programs that are provided to youth are developmentally appropriate for the participants. If educators make certain that youth programs are quality programs, fit for the audience that is being addressed, youth taking on leadership responsibilities including decision making will follow naturally, progressively gaining greater levels of responsibility (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). This will provide youth with the "room to grow" to take on the kinds of decision making discussed by young people like those in the research study described above.

Finally, service learning as a method of teaching and learning should continue to be incorporated into all levels and types of programming done in Extension. In continuing this integration, youth and adults need to be educated on all relevant facets of service learning from definition to implementation.

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