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The effects of service learning on children

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Abstract

Service learning is a teaching strategy used to connect classroom curriculum with service projects in the community (Skinner & Chapman, 1999). These opportunities enrich educational goals and enable students to apply what is learned in the classroom to meaningful service opportunities in their communities (National Commission on Service Learning, 2007). Service learning opportunities require a specific process in which students prepare and participate in the service opportunity as well as reflect and connect what was learned to classroom content (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Education is changing and evolving. Educators are responsible for meeting the needs of all students, with various abilities (Tomlinson, 2001). Service learning opportunities help educators meet the needs of all students. There are several academic, emotional, and social developmental benefits of service learning. Students can also learn civic responsibility and community involvement through service learning opportunities (Bringle & Phillips, 2003). Service learning opportunities enhance academics and help instill positive youth developmental characteristics in students.

Service learning opportunities are supported by educators as well as stakeholders in the community (National Commission on Service learning, 2007). During a time when education reform is at the height of discussion, administrators, educators, parents, and stakeholders all support and recognize the benefits of service learning opportunities in schools and are willing to financially support such programs (Academy for Educational Development).

THE EFFECTS OF SERVICE LEARNING ON CHILDREN

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by

Cecilia R. Corken

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This Research Paper by: Cecilia R. Corken

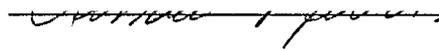
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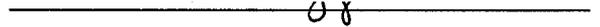


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Abstract

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Service learning opportunities are supported by educators as well as stakeholders in the community (National Commission on Service learning, 2007). During a time when education reform is at the height of discussion, administrators, educators, parents, and stakeholders all support and recognize the benefits of service learning opportunities in schools and are willing to financially support such programs (Academy for Educational Development).

The Effects of Service Learning on Students

Education in the United States is changing and evolving (United States Department of Education, 2006). Educators continue to learn more about the way in which children learn. Current educational research has supported the idea that children learn differently. Researchers continue to present information to educators with the intention of heightening the awareness of students' varying learning abilities (Tomlinson, 2001). The purpose of heightening awareness regarding students' learning abilities is so educators can meet the needs of all students, regardless of abilities. Thus, traditional teaching methods have changed and adjusted to accomplish this task. Educators are constantly searching for ways to differentiate their instruction and spark an interest in all students (Tomlinson, 2001).

American classrooms are diverse consisting of students with varying needs and abilities (Balsano, 2005). Furthermore, education reforms such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), the push for integration into the regular education classrooms, and differentiated instruction have forced educators to change and adapt their teaching methods to meet the needs of all students in the classroom (United States Department of Education, 2006). With the implementation of these reforms, it is vital that educators use adaptations and different teaching methods to help all children succeed (Balsano, 2005).

Service learning is one teaching method that helps address the needs of all students (National Commission of Service Learning). Service learning creates opportunities for students to integrate classroom curriculum into service projects and tasks in the community. These opportunities are hands-on methods of teaching the

classroom curriculum. Service learning opportunities reiterate classroom curriculum and help less advanced students better understand the content (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Furthermore, these opportunities allow more advanced students the opportunity to take classroom curriculum one step further. Advanced students plan, participate, reflect, and apply an experience to the classroom content (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Thus, service learning opportunities are a form of differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001).

There has been a shift in education from involvement in community service to implementing service learning (Muscott, 2000). Community involvement tends to be a one-time task in which students participate in a task without any preparation, reflection, or connection to the curriculum, whereas service learning requires preparation, participation, reflection, and application (Muscott, 2000). Thus, service learning, in a sense, more meaningful and purposeful than community service or volunteerism because students are applying what was learned to classroom content and integrating the core values learned through the service into their own life (Muscott, 2000).

Service learning opportunities enhance academic curriculum and help promote awareness of social issues within the community. Both administrators and educators support these opportunities. The National Youth Leadership Council (2005) compiled a report entitled *Growing to Greatness: The State of Service Learning projects in United States Schools*. The report consists of compiled data from public school principals regarding the impact of community service and service learning in public schools. The results showed that nearly forty-six million schools in the United States implement some form of service learning requirement in the curriculum. Furthermore, during a time when

improving education in the United States is a top priority, school principals and parents continue to support and value the purpose of service learning (Balsano, 2005).

There are several academic, social, and emotional benefits to service learning. Furthermore, these opportunities help instill positive youth characteristics, which in turn, help decrease the likelihood of future negative behaviors (Bringle & Phillips, 2003).

The following pages define service learning and present specific characteristics that differentiate service learning from community service and volunteerism. Different types of service learning will also be addressed as well as the various academic, emotional, and social benefits of participating in service learning opportunities. Finally, several researchers argue that service learning opportunities help instill positive youth developmental characteristics in students.

Importance of Service Learning

Improving the quality of education in the United States has been a top priority for several years (Fiske, 2001). Several educational reforms have been passed with the intention of improving education and meeting the needs of all students, regardless of their abilities and needs. The terms differentiated instruction, multiple intelligence, integration, accountability, standardized testing are all concepts and teaching methods that play an important role in educating children (Tomlinson, 2001).

The Academy for Educational Development compiled a poll to determine Americans' perspective on the importance of service learning (Academy for Educational Development, 2006). The poll surveyed more than two thousand Americans. The results suggested that Americans believe strongly in the purpose of service learning

(Academy for Educational Development, 2006). The results also suggested that Americans expect schools to prepare its students for the future by teaching advanced skills to succeed beyond formal education (Academy for Educational Development, 2006). Additionally, Americans believe that teachers should strive to connect information learned in the classroom to skills students will need to be successful at work and in the community (Academy for Educational Development, 2006). Therefore, during a time of budget cuts and focus on the core subjects including reading, math, and science, the polled Americans believe that service learning opportunities are important, beneficial, and help accomplish important academic goals. Furthermore, Americans believe that students learn the values and skills needed to be successful in school and in the community through service learning experiences (Fiske, 2001).

Service Learning

The definition of service learning is defined by specific characteristics. These characteristics differentiate service learning from community service and volunteerism in several ways (Richardson, 2003). The following section defines service learning and describes the specific criterion of service learning.

Definition of service learning. Service learning is a teaching method that enhances classroom curriculum. Students apply the concepts learned in the curriculum to service projects in the community. Essentially, students combine learning objectives with genuine needs in the community. Service learning is education in action (Avenatti, Garza, Panico, 2001). Unlike community service, service learning allows students to apply classroom content, prepare for the experience through research or interviews,

participate in the service experience, reflect on the experience, and discuss ways to further integrate the concepts learned from the service experience (Avenatti, Garza, & Panico, 2001). According to the National Commission on Service Learning (2006), service learning is defined as opportunities linked to academic content and standards which help young students determine and accomplish genuine community needs. Service learning opportunities are reciprocal, benefiting both the community and the student (National Commission on Service Learning, 2006). Furthermore, these opportunities combine a service experience with a learning experience, can be used in any subject area as long as it relates to the learning goal, and works with all ages (National Commission on Service Learning, 2006). Service learning experiences are typically positive and meaningful to students participating. They can help develop skills of teamwork and encourage students to apply problem solving skills and critical thinking skills beyond knowledge learned in textbooks (Eyler & Giles, 1999). The learning from service learning opportunities tends to be more meaningful and emotionally driven than classroom learning alone (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Characteristics of service learning. As noted earlier, service learning differs from community service and volunteerism because of the specific characteristics that are unique to service learning. Service learning is a method of both teaching and learning in which students accomplish learning goals and meet community needs (National Commission on Service Learning, 2007). Eyler and Giles (1999) suggest that when students participate in service learning, the service experience enhances their understanding of the classroom content.

Types of Service Learning

There are three specific types of service learning including direct, indirect, and action. The three types of service learning benefit students in different ways.

Educators choose the type of service learning based on the goals and purpose of the service learning experience (Parker & Mabry, 1998).

Direct. Direct service learning is when students meet, interact, and develop relationships with the individuals they serve. Direct service learning is when the students themselves work on a project or task. Some examples of direct service learning are tutoring a student, coaching an individual with a disability, building a home for Habitat for Humanity, visiting or helping an elderly individual in a nursing home, cleaning up a natural resource, or serving a meal at a local soup kitchen (Peace Corps, 2007). Direct service learning is when students are working directly with the recipients of the service learning project.

Indirect. Indirect service learning is when students perform a service to individuals without being directly involved with the individuals receiving the service. There are several examples of indirect service learning including organizing events in the community, offering assistance to a local agency, creating fliers to promote a specific event, or organize various awareness days to educate community members about a specific issue (Peace Corps, 2007). Essentially, indirect service learning is when students take part in a project or task but do not work directly with the individuals receiving the service.

Action. Action service learning is when students take action against some issue in the community or school (Peace Corps, 2007).

Benefits of Service Learning

There are several benefits of service learning for students. As noted earlier, administrators, educators, parents, and stakeholders all believe in the purpose and importance of service learning. Service learning opportunities help children develop academically, emotionally, and socially. These opportunities also help develop positive youth development characteristics. Furthermore, civic responsibility and awareness of the needs in the community also improve when students participate in service learning experiences.

Academic benefits. Service learning opportunities enhance academic curriculum (Eyler & Giles, 1999). These opportunities are directly related to the course content and as a result, students learn by doing (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). For example, when students learn about the history of voting or the process of passing a bill, the coexisting service learning project may consist of improving awareness of presidential candidates in a school or in the community. Essentially, service learning opportunities allow students to apply the information learned in the curriculum to practical experiences in the community (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). Additionally, several researchers have suggested that service learning opportunities can improve school attendance and grade point average, develop leadership and communication skills, improve awareness of community and governmental issues, and develop a stronger sense of cultural awareness (Billig, 2000; Brandall & Hinck, 1997; Choi, 1998).

Additionally, differentiated instruction is defined by making adjustments to meet the needs and abilities of all students (Tomlinson, 2001). Service learning opportunities help meet the needs of all students by providing a hands-on experience for children whom learn best by performing tasks. Furthermore, service learning opportunities help enhance the learner of both advanced and less advanced students (Clark, Croddy, Hayes, & Phillips, 1997). Additionally, researchers have suggested that students who participate in service learning opportunities are more motivated to learn and attend school (Billig, 2000).

Emotional, social, and behavioral benefits. There are several emotional, social, and behavioral benefits of service learning. First, students learn teamwork and the ability to work towards a task with a group of individuals (Hamilton & Fenzel, 1998). Second, students who participate in service learning become more socially responsible than students who do not participate in service learning experiences (Hamilton & Fenzel, 1998). Third, students who participate in service learning opportunities tend to exhibit more positive behavior and are less likely to be referred to administrators for disciplinary action (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). Additionally, students involved in service learning opportunities tend to have an increased sense of their own abilities and competencies. They also are more likely to exhibit pro-social behaviors (Balsano, 2005). Finally, students who engage in service learning opportunities become more socially aware of the issues in their school, community, state, and country. Essentially, students can become more empathetic and aware of the issues occurring within the community, country, or

world (Hamilton & Fenzel, 1998). Service learning opportunities help children become less egocentric (Hamilton & Fenzel, 1998).

Additionally, service learning opportunities for children with emotional and/or behavioral disorders are becoming more prevalent. Children with emotional or behavior disorders tend to be portrayed in schools as lazy, unmotivated, or troublesome. These children often learn best from non-traditional teaching methods, hands-on projects, or application learning (Muscott, 2000). Thus, children with emotional and behavioral disorders participate in service learning opportunities to feel more confident, independent, and develop a greater sense of self-worth (Muscott, 2000).

Civic responsibility and awareness. Students in elementary, middle school, and high school tend to be rather egocentric (Vernon, 2004). Service learning opportunities help students become more aware of the issues in their community and increases their knowledge of community needs (Hamilton & Fenzel, 1998).

Positive youth developmental characteristics. There are specific assets that can be developed in children as a means of helping children succeed. These developmental assets serve as protective factors for children (Lerner, Fischer, & Weinberg, 2000). Positive youth developmental characteristics are similar to developmental assets in that once they are instilled in children, children are more likely to improve academically, socially, and emotionally (Fiske, 2001). Researchers suggest that positive youth developmental characteristics serve as the foundation for an overall positive and healthy (Fiske, 2001). It is suggested that service learning opportunities help instill positive developmental characteristics in children and (Balsano, 2005). There are five specific

attributes that define positive youth developmental characteristics including competence, confidence, positive connections, character, and compassion or caring (Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg, 2000). Each of the five attributes is specifically defined. Competence is defined as both social and academic competence. Confidence is defined as a positive image of self. Positive connections are defined as relationships with family, friends, and the community. Character refers to morality, integrity, and application of specific values. Compassion is defined as respect and empathy for others. Service learning opportunities can help develop these positive youth developmental characteristics in children and thus lay the foundation for a healthy and positive development (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003).

In addition to positive youth developmental characteristics, service learning opportunities also help develop other important and specific assets. For example, these opportunities help children feel a sense of acceptance. Once acceptance is developed, children are more likely to trust (Fiske, 2001). Another asset that can be developed from service learning opportunities is a sense of accomplishment. When students feel a sense of accomplishment, they tend to take ownership in what they accomplished and also become more motivated to work towards a future goal (Hamilton & Fenzel, 1998). The final need that can be fulfilled by service learning opportunities is the ability to make a difference. When students believe they can make a difference, their self-esteem and eagerness to help improves (Billig, Brandell, Hinck, & Choi, 2000). Service learning opportunities

Conclusion

Education in the United States is changing and evolving. With the passing of various education reforms, the push for integration of students into the regular education classroom, and the notion of differentiated instruction have changed education and the way we teach children. These reforms have forced educators to change their teaching methods in order to meet the needs of all students. Classrooms are becoming more diverse, full of students with varying needs and abilities. Educators must use various teaching instruments to help all students succeed. Service learning opportunities are one way of helping all students succeed. They are beneficial for both less advanced and more advanced students. During a time when educational reform is a top priority, administrators, teachers, parents, and stakeholders support and believe in the purpose of service learning opportunities.

Service learning is a teaching and learning method that enhances the classroom curriculum. These opportunities connect the classroom content to genuine service needs in the community. The service learning process consists of preparation, participation, reflection, and integration. These opportunities allow students to connect classroom content to real-life situations outside the classroom. These opportunities are beneficial for both the student and the community or individual receiving the service.

There are several benefits to service learning. There are several benefits of participating in service learning opportunities for all students. These opportunities help students develop academically, emotionally, and socially. Furthermore, students learn a greater sense of civic responsibility. Finally, these opportunities can help instill positive

youth developmental characteristics as well as other important attributes in students.

Participating in such opportunities help improve the overall development of students.

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