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Integration of service learning into the public school curriculum

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Integration of service learning into the public school curriculum

Abstract

In the researcher's hometown, in the last year of high school, there were two false fire-drills and two intentionally set fires. There was one firecracker set off in a restroom. At this school, swearing, fighting, and stealing among students have become common place. In addition to these, cases of verbal abuse of teachers, teen pregnancies, and substance abuse have increased. All these events happened in a 3 town with a population less than thirty-thousand, and the future does not look bright. This school, like many others is faced with teaching unmotivated students subjects they do not find relevant; it is searching for a solution. One program that is helping to change attitudes in other schools is community service learning.

Definition of service Learning

INTEGRATION OF SERVICE LEARNING
INTO THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Rita M. Arnold

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Integration of Service Learning
into the Public School Curriculum

Introduction

In the researcher's hometown, in the last year of high school, there were two false fire-drills and two intentionally set fires. There was one firecracker set off in a restroom. At this school, swearing, fighting, and stealing among students have become common place. In addition to these, cases of verbal abuse of teachers, teen pregnancies, and substance abuse have increased. All these events happened in a town with a population less than thirty-thousand, and the future does not look bright. This school, like many others is faced with teaching unmotivated students subjects they do not find relevant; it is searching for a solution. One program that is helping to change attitudes in other schools is community service learning.

Definition of Service Learning

Service learning, as defined by Shalaway (1991), is "the practice of integrating curricular content with community service" (p. 98). The idea

is not a new one. In fact, according to Conrad and Hedin, (1991) the general concept of integrating service and education was born in the 1930's with John Dewey's belief that education should involve "stimulating academic and social development through actions directed toward the welfare of others" (p. 744). Although the idea was well received by some, others feared inculcation of values they did not embrace. Consequently, the concept has not always been a welcome part of public education.

Currently, a variety of programs are being developed under the service learning umbrella. PennSERVE is an organization developed by the governor of Pennsylvania (Briscoe, 1991); Community Service Learning (CSL) is being used in Springfield, Massachusetts (Anderson, Kinsley, Negroni, and Price, 1991); and Project Service Leadership (PSL) is being implemented in the state of Washington (McPherson, 1991). Regardless of its title, the concept of incorporating service activities into the regular school curriculum remains the same.

Review of Literature

The reasons for incorporating service learning into a school's existing curriculum are many. According to Kennedy (1991), Hartoonian and Laughlin (1989), and Nathan and Kielsmeier (1991), three primary reasons are reinforcement of democratic principles, increased understanding of citizenship responsibilities, and improvement of problem-solving skills.

Since the United States is the oldest democracy on earth, and the governmental status of many nations worldwide is changing rapidly, it is very important that young people today understand what democracy is and what their role is in maintaining it. Children need to understand that for democracy to work, the people must participate. Supporting this, Senator Edward Kennedy (1991) states, "Democracy means more than the freedom to pursue our own self-interest. It also means the responsibility to participate in the life of the community and the nation--the responsibility to give something back" (p. 772).

Moreover, Hartoonian and Laughlin (1989) point out that "students need opportunities to learn and practice their roles, rights, and responsibilities as citizens of a democracy" (p. 391). Finally, McPherson (1991) emphasizes "the ability to contribute effectively within a democratic society" (p. 752) as being a primary attribute of a citizen.

Such a contribution involves more than voting. It also includes respecting the rights of others, understanding the hierarchy of government, and sharing in the responsibilities of preserving democratic policies. All of these issues are currently being addressed within the existing curriculum. The task, then, is for schools to provide opportunities for real-life experiences where students can apply curricular content.

Part of preparing students for participation in a democratic society is the development of good citizenship. Citizenship is defined by Webster's New Twentieth-Century Dictionary (1970) as, "the duties, rights, and privileges of a citizen" (p. 331). According to Nathan and Kielsmeier (1991)

"in a democratic society, one of the basic purposes of public schools is to prepare students for active, informed citizenship" (p. 742). While this preparation was once the responsibility of the family or church, changes in family structure and roles, and a decline in church attendance have diminished the influence these institutions have over a child's education. It is because of these changes that the responsibility for preparing children for active, informed citizenship has been shifted to the schools. Moreover, it may be due to the slow transition of supervision, that many students are missing the message. It appears true, that service learning is one way of teaching children that citizenship consists not only of an individual's rights and privileges but of his or her responsibilities as well (Hall, 1991).

If citizenship encompasses the rights, duties, and privileges of an individual, then it also is concerned with the observation and tolerance of the rights, duties, and privileges of others. Hall (1991) states that "cultivating the

spirit of service and generosity provides young people with an opportunity to transcend self-centeredness, to develop genuine concern for others, and to put into action positive attitudes and skills" (p. 756). Moreover, he cites the benefits of enhanced self-worth, personal responsibility, and a willingness to meet challenges as being natural byproducts of performing services for others.

It appears true, at this point in American history, more than any other, that the need for citizenship instruction is imperative. Young people should become involved not only in their own lives, but in the lives of others. Since families may not be able to provide positive citizenship training, schools need to teach the skills required for effective citizenship and provide opportunities for practice. Schools are now the arena within which children are expected to learn all that is involved in citizenship (Nathan and Kielsmeier, 1991).

Finally, service learning promotes problem-solving abilities and critical thinking

skills in young people. Nathan and Kielsmeier (1991) note that "when teachers integrate service and social action into their academic programs, students learn to communicate, to solve problems, to think critically, and to exercise other higher-order skills" (p. 742). To illustrate this, Lewis (1991) describes the problem of hazardous waste as faced by students involved in Community Problem Solving, Jackson Elementary School, Salt Lake City, Utah. She states, "They were fascinated with this problem--it was not an imaginary situation or a case study in a textbook--it existed in their neighborhood" (p. 47).

Service learning provides students with the opportunities to identify problems, plan a course of action, and initiate programs for positive change in their own communities. According to Nathan and Kielsmeier (1991), it is when students are "involved in the planning and providing" and the rendering of "significant and valuable service to meet genuine needs in their community" that service learning takes place (p. 741).

Clearly, service learning helps students nurture many qualities. Participation in service activities reinforces the importance of being an active member of a democracy. Moreover, it illustrates that citizenship carries with it responsibilities as well as rights and privileges. Finally, service learning strengthens problem-solving skills by providing students with opportunities to participate in problem-solving in their own communities.

Service Learning in the Public Schools

As was mentioned before, the responsibility for monitoring service projects has shifted from the family and church to the public schools. This shift leaves some individuals wondering why schools should carry the load, and how such a program should be implemented (Briscoe, 1991).

Supporting the use of schools for service programs, Congress passed the National and Community Service Act of 1990. According to Senator Edward Kennedy (1991), "this act will fund programs enabling students from kindergarten through college to serve their communities, [and

it will fund programs] enabling older Americans to volunteer as well" (p. 772). The act expands summer youth corps programs and supports educational scholarships. Other funding sources include: state monies, county or local monies, and private or business contributions. Therefore, the funding is available for public schools to set up service learning programs

Other reasons for using schools as service project supervisors include: schools have access to multiple forms of technology; they have a network of community connections; and schools are better able to monitor the interaction of many students and community organizations.

Senator Edward Kennedy (1991) asserts, "Once exposed to the needs of the community and the responsibility of helping others, young people will have an increased sense of community involvement and a more realistic view of the value of their own learning" (p. 772).

Moreover, Nathan and Kielsmeier (1991) state that, "combining classroom work with service and social action means learning by doing and giving.

And it's the giving that answers the 'why' questions students so often raise about school" (p. 741). Clearly, schools are the most uniform and cost efficient forums for monitoring community service projects for young people. The greater concerns, therefore, are in when and how to implement a service learning program.

Time Considerations

When educators are asked at what point in a child's education a service learning program should be initiated, the unanimous answer is early. It is believed that early exposure to community service instills a value for continued participation throughout a person's life. Supporting this, Serow, Ciechalski, and Daye (1990) suggest that, "early involvement in voluntary action often foreshadows a lifelong commitment to prosocial behavior" (p. 158). Moreover, Anderson, Kinsley, Negroni, and Price (1991) state, "If children are exposed in their formative years to the values of participation in the community, they will internalize those values" (p. 763).

In addition to these, Kennedy (1991) points out that, "it is not surprising that the majority of young volunteers continue to serve after their initial experience or that most volunteers decide to increase their time commitment" (p. 772). Finally, Clark (1990) summarizes the benefits of early initial experiences by saying:

In my opinion, it is during the early years in school that we as educators do our best job of preparing youth to value service and community involvement. We teach team work, cooperation, sharing, and following rules. We do projects in groups and emphasize being kind to and helping others. We work on these skills as an important part of helping children learn successfully to be part of a group (p. 207).

To answer the question of how to incorporate a service program into schools, the primary answer is to integrate it into the regular curriculum. Nathan and Kielsmeier (1991) suggest that, "the most effective service/social action programs are integrated into a school's curriculum" (p. 741).

More specifically, Anderson, Kinsley, Negroni, and Price (1991) state that, service learning as a part of the educational process, should "meet instructional goals and be integrated" (p. 762) into the entire school curriculum.

Although integration of service learning into a school's curriculum is strongly supported by many practitioners, time remains one major obstacle to its ultimate success. The schedule most schools follow has students going through a sequence of classes for seven hours per day. This type of schedule does not lend itself to the demands of community service projects. To allow for these demands, there needs to be an adjustment in the current format. Addressing this issue, Reeder (cited in McPherson, 1991) proposes:

In order to provide service-learning opportunities that are viable, we really need to change the structure of the school day - we really need to provide time during the regular school day for students to be in the community performing their service. We also

need an opportunity for them to reflect on the service in the school setting (p. 753). The proposal goes on to suggest a half day per week be set aside for service projects, and that time be set aside for students to reflect on their experiences and to gain feedback from teachers. Perhaps the funding from the National and Community Service Act 1990 could be used in adjusting the school day to meet the needs of the students participating in community service projects.

In summary, incorporating service learning programs in the regular school curriculum has many advantages. In order to realize these advantages, a program should be integrated at all grade levels. It should provide time for students to perform services during the regular school day; and it should provide time for individual reflection and teacher feedback. When service learning becomes a part of a school's curriculum, it provides students with opportunities they may not otherwise have.

Successful Service Learning Programs

Service learning programs are being implemented throughout the United States. Shalaway (1991) describes the program in effect at Challenger Middle School, Colorado Springs, Colorado. At this school, the students have been involved in community service for five years. During that time, students wrote stories for children in hospitals. They helped restore an historical park. Also, they helped design and build a community ampitheater. In addition to these activities, students worked in community kitchens and shelters in order to help those in need.

Praising the new curricular element, Principal Don Joiner explains, "Research shows that for real learning to occur, students need to move from acquiring skills and knowledge to applying skills and knowledge" (p. 98). The service activities provided by this school afford students the chance to apply what they have learned in class.

Another successful program is being implemented in Springfield, Massachusetts. (Anderson, Kinsley, Negroni, and Price, 1991). The program, initiated at Mayor Richard Neal's request, is integrated and spans all grades. According to Neal, service is a "way of building students' sense of citizenship and increasing their involvement in their communities" (p. 762). Students have "adopted" local nursing home residents. Part of their commitment to these residents required the students to write letters and send pictures to their adopted resident. The residents, in turn, called the students each day to ask about the day's events.

The students of this district also helped the hungry and homeless. After seeing slides of Haitian children who did not have shoes, elementary students chose to send their unused shoes to the Haitian children. The authors report, that "an ethic of service is clearly present in some of the schools that have been involved in the Community Service Learning program since its inception four years ago" (p. 762).

In addition to these, PennSERVE is a program devised by Pennsylvania's Governor, Robert Casey. (Briscoe, 1991). The program generates funding and sets policies for the service learning component in Pennsylvania. The most significant realization this state has had since beginning the program is as follows:

It works on the principle that youths can make an important contribution to their communities and that those who see themselves --and are seen by their communities--as producers, contributors, and agents of improvement will take on the attributes of responsibility, productivity, and self-worth that such roles imply (p. 760).

This district has made an important discovery: everyone in the community benefits when young people are given the guidance and the opportunity to contribute to the community. To do this, Pennsylvania is using its funding to train teachers and to provide assistance to participating teachers.

Finally, McPherson (1991) reviews the progress of three service learning programs in Washington State. Project Service Learning is being used in the Penninsula, Tacoma, and Issaquah school districts. These districts are performing services for both their schools and their communities. Students participate in peer assistance, environmental improvement, and community beautification. The point their experience has generated is that the purpose is not to create a collection of service programs. "Rather, it is to develop a series of experiences and learnings that consciously foster an ethic of service, develop civically responsible students, help students feel a sense of efficacy, and enrich the learning process" (p. 752).

Each of these programs illustrates that service learning can be very effective in fostering the values of performing community service in young people. They also demonstrate that the programs require the participation of the entire school district in order to be truly successful. It appears true that all districts,

regardless of size or location can successfully implement a service learning component.

SUMMARY OF BENEFITS OF INTEGRATION OF SERVICE

LEARNING INTO PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM

- I. Democratic Principles
 - A. School-based Opportunities
 - 1. participating in student council
 - 2. voting on issues
 - B. Community-based Opportunities
 - 1. telephoning community leaders
 - 2. writing letters to community leaders
 - 3. circulating petitions
- II. Citizenship
 - A. School-based Opportunities
 - 1. peer-tutoring/assistance
 - 2. helping within the classroom
 - 3. participating in conflict management
 - B. Community-based Opportunities
 - 1. adopting nursing home residents
 - 2. helping in community kitchens or shelters
 - 3. visiting ill or shut-ins
 - 4. participating in service organizations

III. Problem-Solving

A. School-based Opportunities

1. improving school environment
(i.e. recycling, playground clean-up)
2. participating in conflict management
3. participating in student council

B. Community-based Opportunities

1. recycling glass, paper, and plastic
2. writing letters to community leaders
regarding areas of concern
3. conferring with community task-forces -
planning courses for improvement

Conclusions

Across the United States, many schools are getting involved in some form of service learning program. Communities are benefitting from the involvement of young people, and the young people are realizing they are valuable resources for their communities.

Research illustrates the benefits of incorporating a service component into the regular school curriculum. The integration of academics and service helps students develop the skills for

full participation in a democratic society; It makes clear the responsibilities of citizens within that society; Finally, it strengthens students' problem-solving abilities and critical-thinking skills.

Like the high school previously mentioned, many schools have problems they need to solve. Fortunately, there are several courses of action which may be taken. One course school districts might take is that of integration of a service learning component. Perhaps the program could provide for all schools the same benefits it has provided for those mentioned above. A district has nothing to lose. The funding is allocated, the need exists, and all the key ingredients are available. It is the belief of this writer, that the implementation of a service requirement may create the changes many school districts seek.

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