

Service-Learning: Effective Means to Individual Education

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Introduction

Opportunities for community service at all levels develop ethical values of compassion and empathy in students that are essential to the sustainability of a robust democratic society. Over the years, community service and volunteerism have evolved into service learning, which specifically uses service to promote learning in schools. Service learning is especially applicable in the social studies classroom, which sets the goal of both teaching students the history of their world and how to live as active, moral citizens in a pluralistic, civic-oriented democracy. Research indicates that community service leads to increased civic commitment and responsibility among students that betters the foundations of American society (Billig & Grimley, 2008; Wade, 2007). Specifically, service learning implemented at the secondary level in social studies classrooms serves to both enrich the curriculum material and transform students into active agents of social change. Social studies, with its “professed goal of developing active citizens,” present a ripe foundation for citizen education that can be further enhanced by the implementation of service learning (Wade & Saxe, 1996, 331).

Service Learning as an Educational Concept

Despite the relatively recent uptrend of service learning in education, the foundational idea that service in schools serves a larger purpose toward better education first originated with 19th century education pioneer John Dewey (Stewart, 2002; Kessinger, 2011). Dewey argued that the key to learning was the dual interaction between knowledge and skills with real-world experience (Dewey, 1938). Without the opportunity to connect what is learned within school walls to the outside world, Dewey asserted, students tend to acquire mountains of knowledge that may prove to be irrelevant or useless in new situations. According to Stewart (2002), Dewey

advocated experiential education where “students are challenged to discover relationships among ideas for themselves, rather than passively receiving information” (p. 123). Dewey focused on linking emotions and intellect in the classroom to create a student population that was both interested in and passionate about bettering their society. This idea of learning and creating passionate, civic-oriented citizens through service has since evolved into the increasingly popular concept of service learning.

The now ubiquitous term “service learning” first appeared in 1969, around the same time when many other government-sponsored, service-oriented programs like the Peace Corps and VISTA were introduced to American society (Kessinger, 2011). Though service learning has been around for several years as a formal educational concept, its exact definition remains somewhat fluid. As Wade (2000) argued, “Service-learning activities take a wide variety of forms, making defining the term a challenging task” (p. 10). National organizations and education scholars alike have defined service learning according to their own standards and ideas, leading one researcher to discover over 150 different definitions for the term (Eyler and Giles, 1999).

Dynneson, Gross, and Berson (2003), for example, defined service learning in their 2003 paper as “community civics...intended to link the classroom curriculum with direct action in community activities” (p. 44). Wade and Saxe (1996) created a similar definition, writing that service learning is “the integration of service with academic skills and content” (1996, p. 335). In recent years, scholars and organizations have been careful to create a clear distinction between service learning and simply community service. Shumer, a vocal advocate for the movement, argues that the two should be separated completely, stating, “I’m not against the word service, but I think service and volunteerism take the emphasis away from learning” (Stanton, Giles, &

Cruz, 1999, p. 208). The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) is also careful to make this distinction between the two concepts in its own definition:

Service learning is distinguished from community service in two ways. First, the service activity is integrated with academic skills and content. Second, students engage in structured academic reflection activities on their service experiences. (NCSS, 2000)

This definition, like many others, focuses specifically on the integration of service to the community with formalized educational assignments.

For the purpose of this paper, service learning connotes a school-sponsored initiative that uses service to teach students about a specific curriculum issue. Volunteerism, on the other hand, refers to any act of service to a community without a larger curriculum-based goal. Volunteerism focuses primarily on the development of democratic, ethical values within students by exposing them to community needs. Service learning is implemented with the goal of teaching a specific content material as designated by a larger curriculum. Though this model, with the emphasis more on learning than service, has its own unique benefits, I argue that all forms of community service, when accompanied with appropriate scaffolding methods and reflection activities, achieve the larger goal of developing civic-minded, responsible citizens who understand how to positively impact society. This paper will examine the potential benefits of all variations of community service within the school, regardless of its label as service learning or volunteerism.

Review of Existing Literature

There is no shortage of literature arguing for the positive impact of service learning programs in schools, particularly in regards to social studies education. Kaye argues in her book *The Complete Guide to Service Learning* (2004) that service learning leads to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of current social issues, including the environment, hunger and

homelessness, immigrants, literacy, and special needs and disabilities. Multiple scholars have researched how service learning is particularly well-suited to social studies, which revolves around the teaching of past and current themes, events, and trends throughout history, the majority of which are tied to overarching social issues and movements of change. Wade and Saxe assert that service learning programs were initially created with the goal of preparing students to live in a society “fraught with social, environmental, and economic problems” (1996, p. 347). Haski-Levanthal et al. concluded in their 14-nation study participating in the service learning that these programs enhance students’ academic development and life skills while fostering a sense of civic responsibility and commitment (Haski-Levanthal et al., 2010). Though there is still debate over how to best implement service learning within the educational realm, a quick review of existing literature indicates that the general consensus holds that service learning has the potential to serve as an effective approach to robust character education and citizenship preparation. As Kaye writes, “Service learning connects school-based curriculum with the inherent caring and concern young people have for their world...the results are memorable, lifelong lessons for students and foster a stronger society for us all” (2004, p. 6). Service learning exposes students to the real-world application of their education, and can help develop citizens invested and interested in making their world a better place.

But how should a teacher go about the design and implementation of these plans for classroom use? Though there are several service-oriented programs within the United States, there is no national curriculum for service learning. As a result, educators, organizations, and even state education departments have devised their own plans and recommendations for bringing service into the classroom (Kaye; Wade; NCSS; Ohio Department of Education). Kessinger provides specific examples on how social studies teachers can implement service

learning projects and activities in their own classroom (2011). He writes, “In the social studies, a teacher could have his/her students study how each branch of the government directly impacts the life of one’s community...[and then] read about Cesar Chavez and the migrant farm worker and then go on to research current migrant worker issues in a particular locale” (p. 24).

A few scholars (Kaye, 2004; Wade, 2000) have written guidebooks, like the one mentioned previously, on how to integrate service learning effectively into the social studies. These guides offer initial rationale for introducing service learning to the classroom, describe key components of the concept, and present some of the research surrounding the movement. Wade offers specific examples of service learning projects and activities that coincide with NCSS historical themes and content standards at both the elementary and secondary levels (Wade, 2000). Kaye’s book serves as a “how-to” for teachers interested in exploring the world of service learning, and outlines a four-stage model for service learning that involves preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration (Kaye, 2004). Various other organizations, such as the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNS) and NCSS, have established their own standards and “keys” to successful service learning programs. In her comprehensive examination of relevant literature and accounts of firsthand practitioners of service learning programs, Billig (2011) reported eight overarching key standards essential to the implementation of a quality service-learning program or activity. These eight specific standards, as proposed by Billig, are: “duration and intensity, meaningful service, links to curriculum, reflection, diversity, youth voice, partnerships, and progress monitoring” (Billig, 2011, p. 9-12). For each of these standards, Billig then lists corresponding indicators and qualifiers. For teachers interested in teaching service learning, there is no shortage of literature on how to adapt it for the classroom. If anything,

teachers might be overwhelmed by the seemingly endless array of guidebooks, articles, and reports that advocate their own set of standards for quality practice.

At its height, service learning impacts students' academic engagement and performance, civic engagement and skills, and social and personal development. It has the potential to connect academic learning with civic values and social issues in a personal manner. As Billig writes, "The potential [of service learning] is reached when service-learning is done well...when its practice includes particular design features. When service-learning is not done well, it can have few, if any impacts" (Billig, 2011, p. 8). Teachers interested in bringing service learning to their own classroom must conduct their own careful research and planning before its implementation. If service learning is poorly designed, or created without the popular appeal for students, teachers run the risk of learning disengagement and disinterest (Billig, 2011, p. 8). In order to be truly successful, all service-learning projects, assignments, or activities should be designed according to a research-based model, like the ones described above, and with the students' interests and specific curriculum content in mind.

Quantitative Research on Service Learning

For all the positive literature and hype surrounding service learning, however, there is relatively little comprehensive, quantitative research explicitly examining its impact on citizenship education in secondary schools in the United States. Scholars (Haski-Levanthal et al., 2010; Vaknin & Bresciani, 2013; Lockeman & Pelco, 2013) have conducted extensive research at the university and international levels, but only a few studies (Billig & Grimley, 2008; Wade & Saxe, 1996) have examined its benefits on American middle and high school students. As Wade and Saxe discussed, research on service learning often has limitations. They reported the

difficulties assessing its effects and the prevalence of poorly designed research studies and inadequate reporting of research results – most studies only report positive findings (Wade & Saxe, 1996, 339-340). Wade and Saxe examined existing literature and research in order to assess the impact of service learning on four different competencies: academic development, social and personal development, political efficacy and participation, and future civic participation. Their results with for three of the four competencies were either mixed or inconclusive. Wade and Saxe concluded, “Overall, the literature suggests that personal and social development are the best documented outcomes secondary school sponsored community service programs” (p. 342). However, they note that even these outcomes varied among prior research (Wade & Saxe, 1996).

Since Wade and Saxe’s publication, a few other scholars have attempted to measure the impact of service learning on students and citizenship education. Billig, a leading scholar on the field, reviewed existing literature in her own examination of the effects of service learning, but concluded that more “multi-site, experiential and quasi-experimental longitudinal studies that can test the effects of various programs characteristics” are needed in order to fully evaluate the initiative (2000, p. 662). A few years ago, Billig and Grimley (2008) conducted their own research on service learning programs in urban education. Using results and analysis from a four-year service learning grant project for middle and high schools in Philadelphia, Billig and Grimley analyzed surveys, suspension rates, and academic achievement scores to examine its effect in multiple areas such citizenship and civic engagement, social responsibility, and caring. Despite serious limitations within the study, Billig and Grimly concluded, “Service learning can be an effective tool for reaching character education outcomes” (2008, p. 21). However, they still

advocated that more research on the topic is needed to achieve a deeper understanding of how the process of service learning produces its outcomes.

Generally, research in the field of service learning seems to be on the rise, and more studies will likely emerge within the next few years. In order to successfully implement service learning, more studies should be conducted regarding its levels of effectiveness and to determine best practices for future use and definitively establish a relationship between service learning and citizenship education.

Service Learning as Citizenship Education

If the mission of social studies teachers is to prepare students for active citizenship in a democratic society, then service learning is an undeniable means to achieve this goal. As education philosopher Dewey argued, learning should be not be a passive process, but rather an endeavor that connects students' passion and interest in the subject matter (Dewey). American youth is increasingly accused of apathy and disengagement as they enter society (Wade & Saxe, 1996). In the last two presidential elections, approximately 50% of the voting-eligible population aged 18-29 exercised their right to vote (CIRCLE, 2008; 2012). These numbers were significantly higher than preceding elections, and were both times portrayed as a rousing success by politicians and media alike.

But how successful is 50% in comparison to other matters? This still leaves half of America's youth (the country's future, as many educators will remind you) disengaged in the most fundamental and basic democratic right: the right to vote. Though these participation levels are undoubtedly on the rise – since 1996, youth voter turnout rates have increased approximately 11 percentage points – youth voter rates have never exceeded significantly beyond the most

recent rates, and typically hover around the 50% mark. Interestingly, the highest voter turnout rate (55.4%) in a presidential election occurred in 1972, only a few years after service learning programs took off in American culture. As many scholars have asserted, service learning “holds promise for enhancing students’ future involvement in the social and political life of their communities” (Wade & Saxe, 1996, p. 331). Service learning, because it connects education with the importance of serving and participating in one’s community, has the potential to develop students into transformative citizens in a robust civil society.

Application of Service Learning

In order to further assess the potential benefits of service learning, I propose its implementation at Lois S. Hornsby Middle School in Williamsburg, Virginia. Hornsby Middle School serves approximately 890 students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. Because Hornsby does not have an official service learning program tied to their curriculum, service learning could be implemented either on an individual class basis, or through the creation of an extracurricular program. This extracurricular program would take place after school, and would provide community service opportunities for students while integrating specific academic content and objectives. Because this program would not correspond with a specific course or grade level, I would need to conduct further research and work collaboratively with school personnel in order to ensure the creation of a robust, effective program that aligns with an appropriate service learning model. However, the creation of such a program could allow the opportunity for the further evaluation of service learning in regards to citizenship education, and could potentially develop essential civic skills within Hornsby students.

Conclusion

Social studies have the unique opportunity to not only educate their students about the world, but to provide them with outlets for active involvement in this world as responsible, passionate citizens. Service learning allows teachers to expand education beyond the classroom to create “meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active” experience for students (Kessinger, 2011, p. 21). Service learning, if designed and implemented properly, can reach the heads and the hearts of students by integrating academic content with community service and social issues. Though research is still needed to further evaluate the effects and process of service learning, it has the potential to serve as an invaluable tool for character and citizenship education, and should be further explored as a means to achieve this essential goal.

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