



Center for Social Development

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Motivating Students through Classroom-Based Service Learning

Toward Adoption and Impact

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2014

CSD Working Papers
No. 14-11

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Motivating Students through Classroom-Based Service Learning: Toward Adoption and Impact

“[Service learning] made me feel really passionate. It made me think of what I really wanted to do and what I wanted to do for myself. And then, of course, like all the advice that they gave us and stories to tell...I feel like I need to help more people...”

-Student’s reflection from a service learning project as the elders shared their experiences of dealing with discrimination.

Introduction

Experiential learning is a familiar concept for teachers, and project-based learning and field trips are examples of potentially powerful experiential learning activities. Typically, the teacher organizes the resources, classroom space, or field experience and facilitates students’ activities. These include (a) experiencing the activity, (b) processing the details of the experience, (c) generalizing the experience to associated real-life activities, and (d) reflecting about the academic content (UNESCO, 2009). A successful experiential learning activity encourages teacher-facilitated dialogue among students and is designed to build critical thinking skills about core curriculum concepts.

Many school faculty members see service learning as an appealing experiential learning activity for students, but there are some differences between the two approaches. *Service learning* involves young people thoughtfully engaging in organized community service through experiences that (a) meet real community needs, (b) are coordinated between the school and community, (c) are integrated into the curriculum, (d) provide structured time for reflection and writing, (e) provide opportunities to apply academic skills to real-world experiences, (f) enrich the curriculum by extending learning beyond the classroom, and (g) foster social-behavioral attitudes, including caring for others (Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform, 1993; Ohn & Wade, 2009). While experiential and service learning approaches may be combined to enhance students’ academic achievement, a key goal of service learning is to foster opportunities for students to develop civic attitudes and skills, which are critical for a democratic society.

This article will expand on the literature and offer an example of a service learning intervention at the middle-school level. We suggest that three key components of service learning may motivate students, including (a) focusing on altruism, (b) encouraging student voice, and (c) building relationships. These aspects of service learning provide a slightly different grounding than experiential learning activities which prioritize curriculum concepts. They also may be unique in their ability to enhance students’ self-efficacy, which has been positively associated with motivation and academic achievement (Bandura, 1997).

Service Learning in Middle School

“Planning all that made me feel like I was a part of something...like I was managing something...”

-Student’s reflection after one year of classroom-integrated service learning

One example of a middle school service learning program is the positive youth development (PYD) program Wyman Teen Outreach Program (TOP[®]). TOP promotes six principles (i.e., the six Cs) of PYD, including competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and the more recently added contribution (Allen, Philliber, & Hoggson, 1990; Chung, & Philipps, 2010; Lerner et al., 2005). TOP is a national program with 58 partners in 32 states and Washington, DC, and often is implemented in high-poverty neighborhoods. The program served 32,000 teens in 2012 in community-based or after-school settings. Extensive efforts are underway to embed the program within the school setting as part of the regular curriculum. Several middle schools in the St. Louis urban area are integrating the program into the social studies curriculum in one or more grades.

Delivered weekly during one class period over the course of a school year, TOP focuses on helping students develop a sense of purpose, life skills, and healthy behaviors through three key program components (a) weekly educational peer group meetings with a focal curriculum, (b) positive adult guidance and support, and (c) community service learning. During the program, the class becomes a TOP club, facilitated by a trained adult mentor. Activities follow a curriculum and revolve around topics such as goal setting, relationships, decision making, peer pressure and influence, adolescent health and sexuality, and community awareness. TOP also is appealing for the school environment because the service learning component is similar to experiential learning.

Goals of programs that include service learning, like TOP, are aligned with important self-regulation learning constructs associated with academic achievement (Farrington et al., 2012; Pintrich, 1999). Self-regulation learning theory explores students’ interests in a task and their initiative or motivation for doing the activity. Self-regulation may also be important for the development of socioemotional characteristics, including empathy and altruism (i.e., concern for the welfare of others and desire to help) (Larson, 2000; Pintrich, 1999).

Service learning and experiential learning activities are designed to increase students’ self-efficacy and self-regulation. However, service learning may be a particularly powerful tool for motivating students because learning happens through the primary goal of altruism, which requires student cooperation focused on civically oriented activities. Students’ initiative, self-efficacy, and other social-emotional and behavioral characteristics identified as important for academic success (Bandura, 1997; Larson, 2000; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998) may be increased when they use their voices—in the form of their ideas, facilitated discussions, and appropriate trial and error of deliberation—to drive service planning and implementation.

Adolescence: A Developmental Window for Building Academic Confidence

The middle school years are a critical stage for developing students’ social-emotional and behavioral characteristics and positive views of their academic futures (Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2003; Roeser et al., 1998; Ryan, 2001; Wentzel & McNamara, 1999). Service learning curriculum is exploratory, relevant, and encourages problem solving and building of meaningful relationships that may support students’ engagement in school during this developmental window. Service learning

involves creating smaller groups or communities of learning that encourage responsibility and leadership, other goals of a successful middle school education. Service learning activities also connect youth to positive community networks during a developmental stage when their identities are forming. Adult mentors and peers associated with the service learning community may help youth develop important social values that will encourage their responsible choices in and out of school (Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007; Hoffman, Wallach, & Sanchez, 2010; Youniss, McLellan, & Maxer, 2001).

Mounting evidence underscores the integral role of social-emotional adjustment in adolescents' academic achievement and initiative (Farrington et al., 2012; Larson, 2000). Roeser et al. (1998) find that adolescents' experiences in middle school may have a major impact on their overall emotional well-being in adulthood and that the greatest predictor of academic distress in 8th grade (and potentially in later years) is a poor perception of academic performance in 7th grade. The study also finds that there are strong positive correlations between students' perceptions of a supportive school environment, including teachers' help and a *task-goal* structure, with achievement by the end of 8th grade (Roeser et al., 1998). The task-goal structure refers to a school's focus on mastery in a manner that recognizes students' efforts and incorporates cooperative teaching methods and experiential or project-based learning. Alternatively, an *ability-goal* structure encourages competition and emphasizes extrinsic rewards (e.g., grades), which is associated with reduced motivation and reduced engagement in deeper learning for some students (Patrick, Ryan, & Pintrich, 1999; Roeser et al., 1998). While this may seem contrary to common views of rigor, a review of research on social and emotional learning and school success highlights a constellation of strategies, including instructional approaches with increased communication and cooperative learning that enrich the school environment and encourage student success (Zins, Elias, Greenberg, & Weissberg, 2000). Service learning pedagogy may promote cooperative experiences consistent with a task-goal structures aligned with engaging all students.

Additional research suggests that teachers and other adults play an important role in promoting mutual respect, self-regulated learning, and academic efficacy in the educational environment (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). In different studies sampling middle school and college students, there continue to be strong correlations between self-efficacy and self-regulation associated with successful academics (Pintrich, 1999). Not surprisingly, self-efficacy also is associated positively with doing well on a test. Some studies (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Farrington et al., 2012; Ryan, 2001) suggest that self-efficacy and self-regulation are important for adolescents when perseverance is required, and students who believe that their work is meaningful—through service activities, for example—are more likely to report using self-regulatory skills (Pintrich, 1999).

Nurturing Civic Dispositions in Adolescence

Even though the links between self-regulation, self-efficacy, and academic achievement are becoming clearer, modern society and school settings provide few opportunities for adolescents to engage in meaningful activities of their own design, in which their voices are heard, and through which they take subsequent strategic action (Larson, 2000). How might the school community change after incorporating a service learning initiative like TOP? Could it stimulate a positive transformation similar to what has been described as *collective efficacy* (Bandura, 1997; Goddard, 2001; Levinson, 2012)? For example, after one year of TOP being imbedded at the middle school level,

teachers who saw strategies used by TOP facilitators to engage students requested a mini-TOP training to learn about similar activities for the regular classroom setting. Students asked to continue certain types of community service to build relationships (e.g., continuing to visit with the same elders at a retirement center) and requested to continue TOP activities at the next grade level.

Research on the impact of service learning pedagogy on classroom relationships, efficacy, self-regulation, and academic achievement in ethnically diverse schools with significant numbers of low-income families is limited (Hoffman et al., 2010; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Wentzel & McNamara, 1999). However, some key components we think are important for successful implementation of a service learning program—which may be different from successful implementation of an experiential or project-based learning program—include focusing on altruism, student voice, and building relationships.

1. Focusing on Altruism

“Because it’s good for the soul...it makes you feel good about yourself...that you’re helping others without getting paid.”

-Student’s reflection about community service

Cultivating students’ altruistic goals may increase their ability to engage in respectful discussions and practice problem-solving skills that promote efficacy and self-regulation (Levinson, 2012), promising pathways to motivation and academic achievement (Farrington et al., 2012; Larson, 2000). Efficacy also may help develop civic dispositions that can provide benefits, such as inclusion in positive social networks with common values, and contribute to a solid foundation for a young person’s transition to adulthood (Hart et al., 2007; Youniss & Hart, 2005). Classroom-based service learning also may positively influence students’ later involvement in their communities, which suggests that field-based experiences grounded in altruism and implemented with their peers may have long-lasting impacts on adolescents’ future behaviors (Hart et al., 2007; Kahne & Sporte, 2008).

2. Cultivating Student Voice

“This shows kids that it’s not about the money, so it would show them how much of a difference you can make, it’s about volunteering for a couple hours.”

-Student’s view on how young people can make an impact through service.

Integrating students’ voices with others in the school community in meaningful, transparent ways may help create a cohesive, successful school environment (Levinson, 2012; McDermott, 2008). It also requires the engagement of school leaders around unclear issues where they may need to delegate or relinquish control to allow students to take on additional responsibilities. School settings that restrict students’ choices or do not include students in decision making may undermine their sense of efficacy, potentially discouraging them from participating in school activities and the wider community characteristics intrinsic to supporting civic dispositions (Larson & Rusk, 2011; Levinson, 2012). Efficacy is linked to engagement overall, including academics and “grit” or persistence to work through difficult issues which are important academic achievement characteristics (Farrington et al., 2012; Zins et al., 2000). When and how we encourage development of a sense of efficacy in

school communities could impact other benchmarks of academic success (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Levinson, 2012; Rubin, 2007; Ryan, 2001).

3. Building Relationships

“I would go back to the senior citizen residence and bring stuff with me like treats...and we can stay longer and like get to know them better...so they will get to know us and they will know we really care.”

-Student’s view on building relationships through service

The shift from elementary schools to the larger middle schools provides developing youth with freedom to move and make choices but also may have an unintended outcome where they feel disconnected, with few opportunities to build relationships with caring adults (Pellegrini, 2002; Roeser et al., 1998). In a study of middle school students’ perceptions of relationships within a school environment, Bosworth (1995) finds that students identify caring relationships with parents, family, friends, and others within the school community as critical. Students also emphasized the importance of kindness, respect, and empathy and helping others, even if it detracts from their personal agenda. Understanding how to encourage caring school cultures and integrate civic-oriented service learning into the classroom environment to cultivate relationship building is important (Kahne & Spote, 2008; Kahne, Chi, & Middaugh, 2006; Wentzel, & McNamara, 1999; Youniss & Hart, 2005).

Conclusion: The Transformative Potential of Service Learning Pedagogy

“...What I liked most was the transformation, because in the beginning we didn’t really work well together and by the end we did – we learned to work well together...”

-Students’ reflections on service learning over the academic year.

When altruism, students’ voices, and relationship building are priorities, service learning activities have the potential to be transformative experiences. Service learning is an important tool that teachers and other school professionals can use to motivate adolescents in education and for civic action. Early adolescence may be a developmental window where participating in and discussing service learning opportunities enhances students’ problem-solving skills while integrating their intense interest in peers to positively influence the community. Furthermore, the service learning process promotes dialogue consistent with democratic and altruistic practices (i.e., increasing youth’s voices and engaging in open respectful discussion), skills associated with success in adulthood (Akos, Hamm, Mack, & Dunaway, 2007; Fielding, 2001; Levinson, 2012; Mitra, 2008). It may also cultivate initiative by encouraging students’ intrinsic motivation, engagement in the community, and grit, all characteristics linked to academic success (Farrington et al., 2012; Larson, 2000).

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Suggested citation

Robertson, A. S., McBride, A. M., Chung, S., & Williams, A. (2014). *Motivating students through classroom-based service learning: Toward adoption and impact* (CSD Working Paper 14-11). St. Louis, MO: Washington University, Center for Social Development.

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