

LEARNING THROUGH COMMUNITY SERVICE: A PARTNER TO CHARACTER BUILDING

By.

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If teachers are expected to play a positive role in shaping students' moral development they must be armed with the knowledge and *skill* to provide their students the time to understand and practice good values. How should schools teach students about values? What responsibilities do teachers and students have to the larger school community? How can children learn to act morally when so many of the adults in their lives don't?

Around the country, teachers are struggling to find answers to these and other questions about adolescent behavior. The public's outrage about soaring youth crime rates, juvenile delinquency and out-of-wedlock births has reached a shrill pitch. A recent *Newsweek* study revealed that 76 percent of Americans believe that the nation is in moral and spiritual decline. And many people expect schools to play a key role in reversing that trend. Calls for renewed attention to character education continues to reverberate from the rafters at school board meetings, Congressional hearings and church and civic functions across America.

Like many things in public education, the field is full of land mines. People want schools to teach students good values, but can't agree on what the curriculum should include. Parents want schools to get tough with discipline, except with their own children and organizations want schools to buy their packaged solutions for students misbehavior, but offer little evidence that they work.

Idle Hands are Work for the Devil

Many years ago, my grandmother, an African American, South Carolina midwife who had never been privileged to acquire a formal education, used metaphors to inspire her children and grandchildren to practice ethical behavior. It was her contention that continual involvement in hands on activities produced a purity of character. If the work on our farm was not sufficient to keep everyone constructively occupied, she would lend our "idle" hands to neighboring farmers. Her motto "idle hands are work for the Devil"

translated to her belief that long hours of work, preferably helping other people, ultimately developed a person to higher moral character. So was it possible that Granny was promoting "Learning Through Community Service" a long time before it was fashionable? Although she used different language codes to transmit her message, she obviously believed staying busy by helping others made her off-springs better citizens. Character education shares a great deal of common language with service learning. Service learning programs promote the adoption of ethical attributes. Student attitudes and behaviors are elevated when they are introduced to moral concepts inherent in helping others. Students learn about the need for ethical behavior while being exposed to a variety of cultures, backgrounds, and lifestyle perspectives. (Vollmer et al, 1999)

Debra Obert investigated the benefits of service learning and reported the following:

Those who have studied the effects of service learning on students have found that an increase in self-esteem is one of the most valuable outcomes of participation. Students with lower grades are often those at highest risk of various youth problems. Consequently, they could benefit the most from the sense of connectedness and contribution that service can bring. Increased self-esteem results from doing something worthwhile for someone else. Service learning is an especially pertinent antidote for young adolescent students who are typically in a stage of self-focus. Youngsters discover that through making others happy, they find happiness themselves along with a sense of successful accomplishment. Youth can look beyond themselves and gain experience in real life situations. (Scales & Scales, p. 72)

Barbara Kurth, a service learning middle school teacher in Northbrook, Illinois reports in the September 1995 Middle School Journal: *The students involved in our service learning program benefited in many ways. The students earned a sense of personal efficacy and sense of responsibility by engaging in community*

service where they were needed, valued, and respected. They learned that being a citizen requires becoming actively involved in their community. They were also given the opportunity to see the relevance of their academic subjects by connecting their classroom experiences with life in the community. Finally, they were helped to understand, appreciate, and relate to people from a wide range of backgrounds and life situations. (p. 39)

As crime and violence escalate in the society at large, many school districts are beginning to require all middle and high schools to teach students nine core values – citizenship, cooperation, fairness, honesty, integrity, kindness, the pursuit of excellence, respect, and responsibility as part of the regular curriculum (Holland, 1996).

In practice, service learning encourages children to refer to Holland's attributes and examples in their everyday lives. Indeed, students learn to think about courage, loyalty, justice, respect, hope, honesty, and love as they make decisions while involved in quality service learning experiences. When discussing a plan of action in response to an identified community need, students bring to that discussion a shared understanding of fair play that motivates them to enact the principles of volunteerism which supports good character.

Preparing Teachers for Building Character Through Service Learning

Throughout the nation, teacher educators are wrestling with the inclusion of morals, ethics, and values in their teacher preparation curriculums. At the same time service learning, as a teaching methodology, is rapidly becoming a significant strand of teacher training strategies. Preservice teachers, as well as those seeking advanced credentials, who master the cognitive and behavioral skills of service learning are simultaneously prepared to advance the characteristics of character education. Educators who have experienced service learning in their preparation curriculums can be expected to utilize service learning as classroom teachers. They will know how to organize and create plans to interact with the community uniting the subject matter with real world experiences.

According to Steve Clem (????), Vice President for Educational Leadership at the National Association of Independent Schools, *it's easy for schools to get caught up in the "fad" of character education and adopt some*

packaged curriculum that requires teachers to do little more than pass out worksheets to students. It's much more difficult to engage in the time-consuming work of building supportive and caring school communities. (Holland. 1996. p. 4)

Service learning programs are affirming the belief that when given the opportunity students from K through 16 are eager to serve and use their energy to reach out beyond themselves.

At the University of South Carolina (USC), College of Education, service learning is an integral part of the education minor program. All students who enroll in the education minor must give 20 -25 hours of community service in one of more than 30 approved agencies. Many of the agencies are housing children who have been either abandoned, neglected, and/or abused.

The course, EDUC 400 –“Learning Through Community Service,” primarily accommodates sophomore students. Most of the students who enroll in the education minor program are seriously considering teaching as a career. Throughout the semester, the course provides several opportunities for guided reflection. During these sessions students have shared experiences which have profoundly influenced the course of their lives. Frequently the influences they report embrace their own character development. After a few weeks of service to disenfranchised children, many of these young future teachers have made or written comments like the following:

"Never again will I take my middle class life for granted."

"For the rest of my life I will provide help to ease the suffering of children."

"I know that I will be a better teacher, because I have learned to care for and respect children in spite of the baggage they bring to the classroom."

"When I have children. I will make sure they understand that all other children are not as cared for as they are."

"I will use service learning as a teaching strategy because it makes people more caring."

One young man, Terry Cumbee, who was assigned to tutor young adolescents who were incarcerated, reported his service learning experience as the most powerful character enhancing factor in his life. He talked about being a bit frightened when he first reported to the Juvenile Justice facility and saw the razor wire around the top of the compound. He was assigned four young

adolescents whose ages ranged from 14 to 16 and was told that they were "violent offenders." His mission was to improve their reading and writing skills through 20 -25 hours of individual or small group tutoring. By semester end, his progress with two of the juveniles was quite remarkable. Mr. Cumbee shared some of their writings with his classmates and explained that he had discovered within himself a need and the ability to connect with this troubled population. He was offered a part-time job by the Division of Juvenile Justice to continue his work with those and other youngsters in the facility. Terry is convinced that what he learned from the service he provided was how to become his best self. He also expressed his belief that his experience will make him a more effective teacher because he will forever be in search of the best that is within the children he teaches.

Cumbees' experience strongly suggests that students K-16 become more committed to developing ethical communities through activities that define the significance of accepting responsibility for those in the society at large who are less fortunate than themselves. Teachers whose training has included activities for learning through community service may be best equipped to design character building education opportunities for their students.

Today, it is more important than ever for teachers to know and be able to promote good character in their students. Too often children are in home environments that fail them in character development. Ryan and Bohlin point out:

Traditionally, character was built primarily in the home, but today far too many of our homes have fallen down on that responsibility. In the past, the church and synagogue played a major role in building character in our young, but their influence on our children seems to have waned considerably. The business and professional worlds have in recent years begun to put more emphasis on ethical behavior, but they have a long way to go before they are the role models we need for our children. (p. xi)

For educators who believe that building character is just as important as imparting intellectual knowledge, service learning may be a critical addition to the traditional education curriculum. Many scholars believe that educational systems are the most logical places to build and promote individual character in our nations school

children. That process must begin in teacher preparation programs.

Teacher as Role Model of Good Character

All too often the classroom teacher is the most stable person -the constant- in a student's life. With a fifty percent divorce rate in an ever increasing mobile society, children are growing up on "shifting sand." The teacher and the daily familiarity of the classroom serves as a stabilizing force in the life of many children. For young children all across the nation, classroom activities and the teachers' behavior is the first model of influence following their parents or guardians. Teachers who have learned to design and implement quality service learning experiences are fulfilling a Socratic statement from long ago. Socrates stated that the mission of education is to help people become both smart and good (Kevin & Bohlin. 1999). He would probably have enthusiastically endorsed service learning as a strategy for teachers to help children develop intellect and moral fiber,

Reflection papers composed by preservice teachers enrolled in the education minor service learning courses at USC appear to be developing an understanding of their impending responsibility as role models. Jill McDonough wrote in her reflection paper: I had never worked closely with a black person before I started my work through the YMCA. Now I work with them three days a week. I really don't find them different than any other people except their skin color. I really would like to continue my work with a multicultural group so I can strengthen myself so that Others, especially my future students, can learn tolerance from my example.

Wendy Gillette wrote about the rewards she received from her service learning at HOPE for kids. She wrote:

When you get right down to it, serving people's needs just makes you feel good. There is something intrinsically rewarding in seeing that you are helping others; even if the results aren't immediate, there is a sense of doing something worthwhile with yourself and your time that recreation and other diversions can never produce. There is an opportunity to learn and grow as a person, and if you have a difficult experience while performing a service, well that produces its own kind of learning; you develop a stronger character that others, especially kids, can look up to.

Summary

In the opening chapter of *The Moral Dimension of Teaching*, John

Goodlad begins his summary with the following:

I have argued for a teaching profession grounded in the judgment that teachers in schools must make to maximize the education of all children and youths. These judgments must extend far beyond the students and classrooms for which each teacher is responsible. Judgments beyond the immediate classroom are shared with others - administrators, parents, and citizens - who have a stake in our democracy and the school's role in making it work. Unless teachers participate in these judgments, their classrooms are likely to be polluted by decisions that make their classroom tasks more difficult. Virtually all of these judgments require special knowledge and, in the end at least, are normative. They involve values and valuing in addition to relevant knowledge. (p. 27)

Goodlad concludes by adding:

But full recognition of teaching in schools as a profession depends on teachers, individually and collectively, demonstrating their awareness of and commitment to the burdens of judgment that go with a moral enterprise. Teacher-preparing institutions and teacher educators carry a heavy responsibility for the education and professional socialization of teachers who will come to possess the necessary awareness and commitment. (p.30)

Goodlad is just one of many well known and highly respected educators who advocate service learning as a viable teaching strategy. It is difficult to argue with a methodology that promises to engage the learners by connecting the classroom subject matter with real life experiences, while at the same time developing a better more caring citizen. Service learning is a different way of saying "learn by doing" that was advanced by John Dewey in the early years of this century. It was a good idea then and it's a good idea now. The "doing" part of learning empowers students and that empowerment translates to accepting responsibility. Evidence to date

suggests that institutions that prepare teachers will be well served by including a service learning component in all phases of teacher education. As teachers or future teachers themselves develop better character they are learning how to include morals, ethics, and values in their daily interaction with their students.

Goodlad, Soder, and Sirotnik conclude that if teaching is going to reach the level of professionalism being sought today, there has to be a powerful partnership between intellectual growth and moral development:

If the moral commitments to inquiry, knowledge, competence, caring, and social justice and the moral imperatives that derive therefrom for schooling are taken seriously, the burden of ethical responsibilities on educators who work in schools and educators who prepare those who work in schools is enormous and appropriate. (p. 311)

Service learning as a critical teaching methodology is a concept whose time has come. Service learning as a partner with character education cannot be ignored.

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