Service Learning: A Possible Solution

How do we connect young people to their communities in meaningful, intentional ways? Which strategies best help youth build competency and character while solving social issues? Which strategies for adolescents positively influence their social empathy and civic engagement well into adulthood? These are important and complex questions; ones that society and researchers have been trying to resolve for decades. With low voter turnout rates (61.8% in 2012, 45.5% in 2010; U.S. Census Bureau), communities are racing to counteract societal apathy and intolerance. For many, engaging young people in serving their community has been one answer to these concerns.

Service can take many forms, whether voluntary, mandated, or organized through a school, and can have varying degrees of impact on youth and the community. Participation rates in voluntary service amongst high school students are "higher than comparable adult rates; and they appear to be holding steady" (Niemi, Hepburn, & Chapman, 2000, p. 51). However, service experience is not necessarily translating into social empathy and responsibility.

Community service and service learning are related yet each have distinct strategies for connecting individuals to community issues and organizations. *Service learning* is defined as curriculum-based service organized through a course (or institution) that meets academic and community needs and typically includes reflection components (Kielsmeier, Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Neal, 2004; Davidson, Jimenez, Onifade, & Hankins, 2010). By contrast, *community service* is service that does not result in academic credit, can be organized or arranged through schools, and may or may not include reflection activities (Kielsmeier et al., 2004). Some professionals use these terms interchangeably, which complicates the literature. This

article will focus on service learning, and the implications for community service. The purpose

of this article is to urge youth professionals and community organizations to provide quality

opportunities for adolescents to engage in meaningful service, and for parents to support such

participation. In order to do so, the characteristics and benefits of youth service will be

enumerated.

Characteristics of Service

Historically, adolescent service has had common characteristics, regardless if considered

service learning or community service. Youth experience several stages of participation, which

include preparatory, action, and reflection stages. Each stage contributes to the overall depth of

meaning and, when done well, has implications for the realized benefits or outcomes of the

experience.

Preparation. Quality service learning experiences include opportunities to build skills

and increase understanding of the social issue to be tackled. Such skills can include developing

cooperation, communication, leadership, time management, and empathy. McGuire and Gamble

(2006) assert that students who care about the social issue at hand report greater increases in

community belonging and social responsibility (p. 296). Youniss and Yates (1999) suggest that

service be connected to the history of the organization through which the service is conducted (as

cited in Flanagan & Van Horn, 2003, p. 288) so that students view their contributions as adding

to the rich history of efforts. Whitley (2014) highlights the breadth of research on other student

variables that influence the service learning experience; such as personality, attitudes, emotions,

assumptions, beliefs, intellectual/moral development, learning styles, and interest in social

issues, among other factors (p.22).

In addition to the quality preparation of students, the partnerships through which service opportunities are developed need considerable preparation. All partners should be clear as to the structure and function of the experiences, as well as having adequate channels of communication for continual feedback. Butin (2003) advocates for service learning to be sponsored at department or institution level, where experiences can be longer than one course, cross multiple content areas, and become part of the institution's commitment to the community. Additionally, Kielsmeier et al. (2004) advocate for stronger funding and infrastructure to support teachers who incorporate service learning as integral components of their curriculum.

Experience. The length, depth, and duration of service learning experiences influence realized outcomes. Butin (2003) argues that "students need multiple opportunities to engage with the ambiguity and complexity of the experience" (p. 1677). This allows students to more fully experience the social issue, and to "form a sustained connection to their communities" (Flanagan & Van Horn, 2003, p. 288). Building these relationships can increase the social capital of participants—students, educators, recipients, and community members—and increase their critical consciousness and civic responsibility (Whitley, 2014, p. 23).

However, McGuire and Gamble (2006) report that the number of hours spent in service had little influence on social responsibility or community belonging outcomes. Rather, it was the level of psychological engagement, or degree of importance of participation in the service project, that predicted increases in those outcomes.

Reflection. Blyth, Saito, and Berkas (1997) emphasize that service learning experiences without reflection may actually be detrimental to student outcomes. There is much debate as to what the reflective activities should cover, how frequent they should be, and how should they be

carried out. Butin (2003) admits that this clarity is "frustratingly absent" yet suggests this

ambiguity "fosters emergent practices" and does not constrain the field to "definitional certainty"

(p. 1687). Flanagan and Van Horn (2003) recommend bringing the reflection dialogue into a

group setting, thereby raising it to the level of public discourse (p. 288). However, there is no

debate that reflection is a critically important component of service learning (Butin, 2003;

Davidson et al., 2010; Lakin & Mahoney, 2006; Niemi et al., 2000; Whitley, 2014).

Benefits of Service

Given the complexity of service learning contexts, experiences, and variables, it is not

hard to imagine that specifying short-term and long-term outcomes is difficult. Researchers have

explored relationships between service learning and personal outcomes such as identity

formation, sense of purpose, academic knowledge and skills, civic skills, diversity awareness,

and stereotype reductions, among others (Whitley, 2014). Conceptual frameworks and

theoretical models are still in development and need further research to increase knowledge

within the field. However, there are some benefits that warrant emphasis in this article; benefits

to the recipients and to the community at large.

Service Recipients. The recipients benefiting from the service activities (e.g., the

homeless), should be consulted prior to the activity. When possible, Butin (2003) recommends

that the recipients themselves determine ways in which they wish to be helped. This keeps

dignity intact of the recipients and validates their efficacy while allowing those serving to

meaningfully assist. Efforts within service learning programs should not reinforce paradigms of

privilege and power over those who are underprivileged or silenced (Butin, 2003, pp.

1678-1679).

Whole Communities. While it is difficult to measure changes on a community level, it is still a notable pursuit. Outcomes such as vibrancy of marginalized groups; community strengths, connections, and networks; and policy changes to support underprivileged groups are a few ways that community-level outcomes can be assessed. As a youth worker, having youth seen as resources in the community is one major outcome of interest. Flanagan and Van Horn (2003) indicate that when service programs are well constructed, communities are able to see youth as assets and not liabilities (p. 287).

Conclusion

The future of our democracy is dependent on the actions of all community members. We all need to develop an ethos of social responsibility, and instill such an ethos in future generations. To this end, youth work professionals are urged to craft high quality service learning programs that include substantial preparatory and reflective activities. Organizations are encouraged to support infrastructures that facilitate meaningful service learning opportunities and to remain committed to long-term partnerships within the community. Parents are prompted to seek out well constructed programs that engage youth in significant contributions to the social fabric of the community. Our youth need such opportunities to develop empathy, acceptance, and personal skills. Our communities deserve concerted efforts to increase social capital and connectedness.

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