

Service Learning

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People are becoming disenchanted with the education system in America. Teachers struggle to engage the majority of their students. Students look forward to the day when they can escape or complete their schooling. Communities feel little connection to the students and schools that are found within them and their support is minimal. Service learning is hands on approach to learning that is being revamped and refitted to make a difference in our schools. When service learning is incorporated into schools, students' lives, and communities there are benefits for everyone involved.

The most obvious impact service learning has is on the students themselves. Students are expected to develop certain skills throughout their years of schooling. Early on children learn to regulate their emotions through interaction with others. As they age they begin to learn how to collaborate to complete important tasks. They are also expected to develop self-respect, self esteem, self regulation and a sense of personal responsibility. All the while students must learn the basics in communication, writing, history, science and mathematics. While many see parents as the ideal teacher when it comes to non-academic topics, these days children sometimes find that school affords them the best opportunities to develop themselves due to the long number of hours spent in school each day and inattentive parents at home. Through service learning, students find even more chances to interact with others, develop themselves as individuals and achieve academically.

Whether on the job or in a relationship, adults are expected to work well with others and compromise or cooperate to achieve a predetermined goal. School provides students with many opportunities to learn these skills, however, most of the opportunities are unstructured and use a sink or swim approach. The interactions occur between classes, at recess, or after school when teachers are preparing for the next class or getting ready to go home. In these situations the

students are not taught what reactions are appropriate and how to interact with others in a way that will benefit them in their adult life. In the typical school setting, if these students fail to learn how to interact on their own they sink when they become adults. On the other hand, when teachers are engaged with the students, such as during class time, students are typically expected not to interact. This expectation becomes more prevalent as they enter middle school and beyond. This takes away the opportunity for the teacher to correct or influence interactions in a positive way. Service learning causes interactions between students and interactions between students and adult community members. Because the learning is built into the project and teachers are not expected to lecture continually the teachers are able to help students develop better methods of interacting with others. Through these interventions, children easily learn the skills that will be required of them as adults.

Children need to develop healthy self esteem. Depending on the type of service learning, kids could get this boost from younger children requesting their help with a school project, by successfully completing a difficult task or by working with an older adult to complete a task that they alone are no longer capable of. Through these service learning activities the students learn to believe in themselves and develop a sense of self-efficacy (Krystal, 1998). Their futures are enriched because they will fight through difficulties that arise in life rather than giving up. Resiliency, the tendency for an individual to bounce back after a bad experience, is becoming an important indicator when determining the emotional wellbeing of an individual (Merriam-webster, n.d.). According to Wilczenski and Coomey (2007), “Resilience derives from four basic strengths: social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose, which need to be nurtured through home, school, and community resources” (p. 10). While service learning does not take the place of a caring home life, it can make a tremendous difference in the life of a

child trying to survive and thrive despite life's curveballs. Service learning pushes the child to stretch beyond his current skill set and gives him the opportunity to face crisis under the caring supervision of both teachers and community members. With their guidance the student is able to overcome the crisis and look back with a sense of accomplishment all the while gaining more skills to aid in the next challenge. According to psychologist Frank Redl, crises cause the student to see what he can bring to the table (Schneider-Munoz, 2009). Throughout these tangible undertakings the student develops his own unique identity and the student is able to see himself as a success.

Many students find it hard to stay engaged in the classroom. Drugs are prescribed to overly energetic children with ADHD to aid the teachers in controlling them. Students' grades and comprehension are falling (Chaban, 2010). Some students learn to hate school as a young child and drop out at their earliest opportunity. Service learning provides these students opportunities for complete success. Whether the student is tutoring a younger child in reading or spelling, or calculating the dimensions needed for a birdhouse to put up at the local senior center the goal is far more motivating than a letter grade on a piece of paper. Service learning projects incorporate math, social studies, language and more so that the children are able to pick up knowledge without really realizing they are. In a survey done by Scales and Roehlkepartain in 2004, eighty-three percent of principals asked believed students involved in service learning were making definite headway academically (as cited in Nelson and Sneller, 2011). Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morison recorded that three-quarters of students find service learning more exciting than typical school classes (as cited in Nelson and Sneller, 2011) According to research done by C. Swanson, "More than a million students drop out of school annually"(as cited in Nelson and Sneller, 2011, p. 14). Laird and Black found that when students become more engaged in their

school and what they are learning, as occurs when service learning is incorporated, their likelihood of dropping out decreases (as cited in Nelson and Sneller, 2011). They are needed and their success can be measured. Also, organizations working with students can tap into their extra energy using it to their advantage. Due to the properly expended energy these children's behavior becomes more manageable. Overall, participation in service learning increases students' interest levels and the long term benefits are tremendous.

Service learning can have a major impact on the school environment. Violence is a major issue in many big city schools and the fear of it hangs over schools that have yet to be impacted by it. Decreasing violence has been a byproduct of service learning. At Putnam Vocational Technical High School violence decreased in the school and performance levels increased after service projects became a part of the school's education methods (Wilczenski and Coomey, 2007). Students whose fear of violence has lessened are better able to concentrate on actual learning and gaining a positive outlook on life.

Teachers feel the impact of service learning as well. Because students enjoy service learning projects more, the teacher spends less time and energy controlling and disciplining the class (Krystal, 2003). Because the children are more engaged and because they enjoy learning more, teachers have increased opportunities to feel like they are making an impact. Better attitudes in both students and teachers contributes to an energy boost.

Schools benefit when their students make a positive impact on the community around them. Communities are more likely to support students and schools that they see making a positive difference. Sometimes this support is monetary (Wilczenski and Coomey, 2007). Other times community members are willing to become involved in school functions and are able to

suggest new service learning projects. Service learning is mutually beneficial to schools and communities.

Community impact is an important aspect of service learning. Community members without children can see their tax dollars being put to good use in tangible ways that they can see almost every day. Community is at the heart of the service learning concept. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), service learning is, “a method of encouraging student learning and development through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of, a community” (United States. Environmental Protection Agency. Office of Solid Waste Emergency Response, 2002, para. 1). The EPA gives many examples of turning recycling and recycling education into service learning projects, one of which is a coffee grounds recycling program in Bozeman, Montana (2002). Another school program highlighted by the EPA teaches students how to repair and service donated computers that are then used by students within the school (2002). Hammond and Heredia in their book *Fostering Diversity Through Community Service Learning* tell of a school that encouraged its students to learn about a local minority group and design a celebration event centered around the mustard greens they regularly eat. The event helped the minority group to feel more accepted and at home in the community (as cited in Wilczenski and Coomey, 2007). The service learning projects vary greatly in their scope but when designed correctly these projects cause communities to see schools and students in a positive light.

Service learning prepares students to become productive and caring community members. Adults who were repeatedly involved in service learning as children and teenagers often stay involved in their community by volunteering (Wilczenski and Coomey, 2007). Another benefit is a lowering of student dropout rates. According to a report by C. W. Harlow,

“75% of state prison inmates are high school dropouts” (Nelson and Sneller, 2011, p. 14). These high school dropouts were a detriment to their community prior to becoming prisoners. As prisoners they become a long term burden on their community. Lowering dropout rates by incorporating service learning in schools is an enticing alternative.

Service learning is a flexible system easily fitted to the needs of individual students. While it is beginning to be incorporated into some school systems, many schools do not currently participate in any type of service learning project. Service learning has the potential to benefit numerous students, schools and communities.

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