Service Learning, General

10-1997

How Effective a Tool is Student Community Service

Martha Naomi Alt

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen

Part of the Service Learning Commons

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

ow Effective an Educational Tool
Student Community Service?

Martha Naomi Alt

Despite the popular appeal among the public, educators, parents, and even students for community service, there is surprisingly little firm evidence that students who engage in service learn more, develop in different ways, or learn different skills than those who do not. What are the implications for policy, further research, and school practice?

The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 capped a recent resurgence of public interest in voluntary service for community betterment. It builds upon the National and Community Service Act of 1990, supporting volunteer work by young people as well as by retired adults and others.

The second National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) follow-up survey, administered to high school students (and dropouts) in 1992, provides estimates of secondary school students' participation in service. About 44 percent of twelfth graders had done some type of unpaid service (school or community-based) during the previous two years and, of these volunteers, nearly 18 percent had done the work because a school class required it. Although NELS data do not provide a direct estimate of participation rates in service learning (classroom-based programs that link student activity with academic work), these numbers indicate that only about 8 percent of students worked in a school-based service program in the last two years of secondary school. Among all high school seniors, 28 percent were currently doing some type of community service, but only 11 percent did this work at least once a week.

Socioeconomic status (SES) and standardized test performance appeared to be associated with the likelihood of volunteering. Students with higher grades, students in private and urban schools, and students in academic/college preparatory and "other" tracks were more likely to be volunteers.

Theoretical Basis

Cognitive theories have for many years posited that both direct experience and reflection are essential to effective learning. David Kolb (1984) has elaborated on this idea, suggesting that learning requires four steps: observe or experience events; reflect on that experience; develop concepts that explain and allow generalization from the events; and test these concepts in varied situations.

Service learning is distinguished from other types of experiential learning by two factors:

1. Its participants engage in an activity that serves an unmet need in the community (or school) on a volunteer basis.

2. It integrates useful service work with intellectual challenge and academic content, often using thematic links between classroom and off-site experience, and ensuring that volunteer work reinforces skills and knowledge learned at school. Opportunities are provided for reflection and integration of skills and information gained through the volunteer experience.[1]

Reciprocity encourages students to learn from the people they serve, and it elicits substantial commitment to the programs' goals and objectives on the part of those serving.

Service learning was developed partly to produce benefits associated with an experience-based learning model. Kendall argues that service learning should engage students in community service that both provides opportunities for reflection and integrates reciprocity between the volunteers and the group served (Lewis, 1988, p. 26).

Reciprocity encourages students to learn from the people they serve, and it elicits substantial commitment to the programs' goals and objectives on the part of those serving. Service learning is expected to have other positive effects. Among students participating in service learning programs, discipline

---

1. It should be noted that although most school-based volunteer programs currently focus on service learning, many earlier studies examined a range of volunteer work that is better labeled "community service"; the two terms are used almost interchangeably here, but in fact the concepts are different. Most of the studies we reviewed looked at effects of community service by students, but the recommendations in the conclusion assume practitioners are implementing service learning.

problems may decrease, students may approach school with new enthusiasm, and participants may present positive role models for other students. These changes can improve the learning environment for entire classes.

There is general agreement that to maximize learning and development, programs must combine *action* and *reflection*. Action and reflection are complementary, allowing people to draw their own "lessons" that can be applied to new situations. One study found that reflecting on the volunteer experience was the key element that helped students increase their sense of civic responsibility (Rutter and Newmann, 1989). Hamilton and Zeldin (1987) noted that the degree of learning taking place in different public service internship programs was partly related to how closely the content of the reflective seminar followed issues discussed in the legislative sessions that students observed and analyzed.

The opportunity to take active roles and make decisions has also been highlighted as a factor that promotes learning. For example, Calabrese and Schumer (1986) found that teenagers' involvement in community service seems to lower feelings of social alienation and may improve behavior at school. These researchers designed their study to maximize student autonomy: Students were responsible for planning and implementing the project.

> One study found that reflecting on the volunteer experience was the key element that helped students increase their sense of civic responsibility.

We can view advocates of community service as members of two camps: those who believe it can improve educational outcomes (the "education reformers"), and those who see it as a strategy for enhancing young people's values and behavior (the "youth reformers") (Conrad and Hedin, 1989).

The *education reformers* view service as a useful tool for motivating students to learn more and to retain what they learn better. It is reasonable to expect that work in the "real world" motivates students more than typical schoolwork, especially when people are actually depending on them.

The *youth reformers* have gained attention in recent years, as public opinion has accepted the idea that ethics and values among youth have deteriorated. Proponents of this view offer statistics on violent crime, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy and parenting to bolster their argument. They also cite a shift in values away from altruism and toward financial and material comfort. These different goals may lead to different emphases in program design as well as expected outcomes.

Evidence of Effects on Students

Academic Skills and Factual Knowledge

Academic skill development has not been a central issue in studies of service learning, partly because most programs are not designed to improve these skills. Service placements that require students to focus on academic content, such as tutoring other students, have demonstrated some effects on academic performance. In one meta-analysis, researchers found that tutors generally performed better on tests in the subjects they taught than did control students (Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik, 1982, cited by Hedin, 1987). In 33 of the 39 studies reviewed by Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik, tutors benefited from having tutored, though the differences were not large. Tutoring was more effective in improving math scores than reading, and when older students taught younger ones rather than peers. However, these changes in performance were modest (Conrad and Hedin, 1989). Several other studies also found improvements in problem-solving ability, critical thinking skills, peer counseling skills, and working to their full potential (self-evaluated).

Social and Psychological Development

A 1984 survey of high school-based volunteer program coordinators found that enhancing students' personal development was the most commonly cited goal (Newmann and Rutter, 1986). Specific areas of growth mentioned in research include feelings of social responsibility and capacity to empathize, moral reasoning ability, self-esteem and assertiveness, social and communication skills, and orientation toward civic participation. Students gained greater understanding of the problems that people seeking social services faced.

One finding has interesting implications for targeting at-risk students: Troubled teenagers exhibited higher self-esteem after tutoring younger students (Geiser, 1969, in Hedin 1987, p. 45). Many areas of positive social maturation reported, however, rely on students' self-evaluations or small differences between participants and nonparticipants (or small gains among participants).

Citizenship and Civic Participation

Teaching citizenship is one of the central missions of education in the United States. Educators and other experts generally concur that young people have little knowledge of government and often have poor attitudes about their responsibilities as citizens. Concern among educators and civic leaders about students' apathy toward and ignorance of government is compounded by findings that traditional instruction in civics is ineffective. As a

result, some researchers have called for hands-on learning to improve civics knowledge and participation.

The 1986 study of high school students by Newmann and Rutter did not credit participation in service with changing levels of political efficacy, plans for future political participation, or future social/institutional affiliation. This contrasts with Conrad and Hedin (1982), who found that students in service learning showed larger gains in valuing community involvement than other experiential program students.

Hamilton and Zeldin conducted an experiment in which high school students volunteering for local government internships were monitored over one semester.[2] The analysis controlled for GPA, pretest scores on attitudinal surveys, and interest in politics. In this study, participation increased students' knowledge of local government, sense of competence in political work, and belief that government agencies respond to the public's needs. Moreover, the student group that scored markedly lower than the other three in knowledge of local government before the program started was the one that gained by far the most on this measure. Other recent studies using college students found improvements in students' desire to influence the political process, attitudes toward people in need, and feelings of civic duty after they had volunteered to provide social services (Giles and Eyler, 1993; Markus, Howard, and King, 1993).

What Do We Make of Inconclusive Findings?

The research reviewed here provides some indication that participating in service learning programs benefits young people, but there is still relatively little evidence demonstrating the connection between service and particular educational objectives. The literature provides more support for effects on social and psychological development than on academic achievement. Few studies have been conducted that follow such conventions of social science experimentation as control groups and random assignment. Among those that use these methods, some fail to find differences between experimental and control groups, while others find differences on only some of the measures tested.

> The literature provides more support for effects on social and psychological development than on academic achievement.

Results that are statistically significant tend to be of small magnitude. Except for consistent evidence supporting a reflection component, we cannot be sure which program elements and conditions are critical to success, or whether certain programs have varying effects across population groups. For example, no published data have compared the effectiveness of voluntary and mandatory service programs. Even so, service learning has many ardent proponents, many of them teachers, who write with near-unanimity about the positive impact that participation has on students who volunteer.

Much of the research in this area relies on qualitative methods, including interviews with participants and teachers, student journal entries, direct observation, and teachers' written impressions and opinions. Numerous articles (not discussed here) merely report anecdotes to describe the effects of service on students. Subjective evidence of this type is worthwhile, but it may be biased, reflecting the enthusiasm of participants, teachers, program administrators, and even the researchers.

Explaining the Gaps

Of course, sparse research evidence does not mean that a community service component does not (or cannot) produce positive outcomes. It would indeed be unwise to dismiss numerous educators' continued faith in community service based on their own experience. Several possibilities may explain gaps between research evidence and reality:

- Service may in fact influence students profoundly, but methods used to measure these effects may be flawed or inadequate. This is a likely explanation for at least some study results: Determining causal relationships for any learning outcomes is difficult, and certainly this applies to outcomes involving attitudes, intentions, and higher order thinking. Not only are many studies' designs flawed, but test instruments used may be inadequate: Alternative forms of assessment such as student portfolios and presentations are especially well-suited to measuring social and psychological growth, while standardized written tests may not be.

- Variations in program components such as length and intensity of time commitment, interest and skill of supervisors and teachers, opportunities for reflection, and level of responsibility assigned to participants may each lead to differing results. Variations in these components may cause benefits attributable to participation to disappear or appear smaller than they really are.

- In any particular program, some students may change and grow in response to service while others do not. Thus, average changes across a group may appear small at best.

- Researchers may look for specific outcomes that a service program

---

2. In this carefully designed study, volunteers were randomly assigned to internships either immediately or in the following semester. Students from four separate programs answered pre and post-program surveys and wrote in journals on specified topics; the investigators interviewed program coordinators and observed students interacting as interns.

was not designed to achieve, and then conclude, without reasonable grounds, that the program was ineffective. If a curriculum specifically focuses on improving ethical reasoning, tolerance, and empathy, for example, it is unlikely to influence students' reading scores, however effective it may be in enhancing ego development. Similarly, researchers may look for too much, expecting outcomes to appear across a range of areas, when results may actually be restricted to a narrower spectrum.

• Timing and duration of service may make it difficult to link program objectives to outcomes. Brief periods of service are less likely to produce significant learning gains for students than longer periods, regardless of the program's objectives.

Setting Different Goals

In the absence of clear research findings, legislation (and schools and districts) will likely continue to set many different goals, although as the number of goals increases, the chances of achieving any of them probably decrease. Legislation should set focused, achievable goals that are unlikely to conflict with each other (particularly if service is to be mandatory).

An example of an unfocused approach is provided by the National & Community Service Trust Act, which includes among its wide-ranging goals enhancing academic skills, developing students' sense of civic responsibility, and improving their political skills, as well as strengthening communities by bringing people of diverse backgrounds to work together, and working to improve infrastructure and other aspects of community life.

Results of additional evaluations of programs should help target future legislation and any requirements for student service. As states and school districts consider instituting service requirements, decisionmakers should carefully focus their objectives and then build programs around them.

A focused approach is generally much more effective at the school level, where principals and teachers should work together to set their own program goals. A carefully designed service learning course or program may set increasing academic performance as one goal. Careful design and implementation can encourage students to use related academic skills in their service placement and reflect on the challenges at their volunteer job while back in the classroom. Key steps that principals can take to support the effort include such supports such as common planning/training periods, a

A carefully designed service learning course or program may set increasing academic performance as one goal.

lead teacher/volunteer coordinator, additional funding, and making and maintaining liaisons with community-based supervisors.

Planning time is usually needed for practical matters, but teachers from different disciplines may also plan thematically integrated coursework in several subject areas—and link that schoolwork to a volunteer project. Making time for staff training and planning sessions may require extra funds, or it may be provided by a revamped master schedule. Sources of external funding include grants under the National & Community Service Trust Act (Subtitle B programs), as well as technical assistance funds provided under the National School-to-Work Opportunities Act; these funds are administered by state departments of education. School administrators can enhance the success of a service learning program by providing guidance to start small, perhaps with a school-based project like tutoring, and build gradually to a project with placements in the community.

Principals can help the school include a tailored evaluation component in service learning programs to support teachers in setting clear and achievable goals together and in deciding how progress toward those goals will be measured. The main purpose of an informal evaluation is continual reflection on and improvement of the program. The evaluation can be informal, allowing educators themselves to express concerns, ideas for betterment, and their perceptions of accomplishments and drawbacks—or, if funds are available, could involve more formal evaluation by experts.

Conclusion

Considerable support exists for service learning at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. To the extent that the wide-ranging goals of these programs can be achieved, they can make a significant contribution to students' schooling outcomes and development in other areas. Documentation of results to date is generally sparse and unreliable, however, especially for academic outcomes. Substantial work is required to produce better evidence of obtainable outcomes, which can then be used to design and implement more effective service learning initiatives. ~*B*

References

Calabrese, Raymond L., and Schumer, Harry. "The Effects of Service Activities on Adolescent Alienation." *Adolescence,* Fall 1986.

Cohen, Peter A.; Kulik, J. A.; and Kulik, C-L. C. "Educational Outcomes of Tutoring: A Meta-Analysis of Findings." *American Educational Research Journal,* Summer 1982, pp. 237–48; ERIC Document EJ 272 101.