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Service Learning Through the High School Pyramid Model:

A Case Study

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Abstract

The intellectual and philosophical roots of service learning have been attributed to the conceptualizations of democratic society put forth by Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s and John Dewey in the early twentieth century (Kenny et al, 2002). Dewey believed that students would learn more effectively and eventually become better citizens if they engaged in activities that linked service to the community and the curriculum. This idea of linking service to curriculum has been further embraced by advocates of service learning today.

Service learning is a multidimensional and cross-curricular approach to teaching and learning that engages students in community-based, real-world projects. In this paper, we examine the theoretical roots of service learning, its attributes, its outcomes, implementation models and a case study of Forest Park Senior High School in Prince William County, Virginia.

Service Learning Through the High School Pyramid Model: A Case Study

Theoretical Framework

The intellectual and philosophical roots of service learning have been attributed to the conceptualizations of democratic society put forth by Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s and John Dewey in the early twentieth century (Kenny et al, 2002). John Dewey, the major architect of progressive education in America, sought to unify personal and communal development (De Vitas et al, 1998) by integrating service with teaching and learning. De Tocqueville maintained that individual strivings for advancement in the United States must be countered by the social commitment to civic, religious, and moral freedom (Kenny et al, 2002). Though worlds apart, both believed that the tenets of a democratic society resided in its citizenry being able to help one another.

Schine (1999) argues that service learning is a promising endeavor that embodies the principles enunciated by John Dewey as “learning by doing.” Dewey, an advocate for service learning, believed that students would learn more effectively and become better citizens if they engaged in an academic curriculum that included service to the community (NCES, 1999). Dewey recognized the stark disconnect between what was taught in the classroom and what was actually practiced in the real world.

In essence, Dewey thought the strength of a community rested with the recognition of shared aspirations to overcome common problems (De Vitas et al, 1998). Most importantly, if social reform measures were to ever be achieved, then there must be a bridge between the classroom curriculum and the surrounding community.

Advocates of service learning believe that learning through service can provide young people with an opportunity to learn about and address significant real world issues in responsible ways. The notion of integrating service experiences into curriculum and connecting schools with agencies and neighborhoods has spread from teachers to schools, to community agencies and to entire communities (Kinsley & McPherson, 1995). The strength of service learning rests in the ability to build relationships based on vested interest and mutual collaboration (Pompa, 2002). These experiences connect students to their communities, enrich students' learning, and help them to develop personally, socially and academically (Kinsley & McPherson, 1995)

Kinsley and McPherson (1995) suggest that service learning plays an important role in helping to reach National Education Goals. In their book, *Enriching the Curriculum Through Service Learning*, they outline the benefits of service learning as contributing to good citizenship, involving students in hands-on learning, problem solving and applications of academic settings. Today champions of service learning have grasped the concepts outlined by Dewey and tailored them to address the community and academic needs of the modern era. Regarded by many as the progenitor of service learning, Dewey's philosophies helped inspire both public and private service learning initiatives. In summarizing a history of service learning programs initiatives, Kenny et al (2002) writes:

As early as 1920, William James proposed the notion of nonmilitary national service in his essay on the "Moral equivalent of War." The Civilian Conservation Corps (1933), which served as a forerunner for future youth service programs, was designated to resolve unemployment programs by engaging youth work/service projects. The Youth Conservation Corps of the 1970s involved youth between the ages of 14 and 18 in summer conservation programs. The Peace Corps, VISTA, National Teacher Corps, Job Corps and University Year for ACTION emerged during the social activist climate of the 1960s and early 1970s and engaged young people in addressing social and economic problems in the U.S. and abroad. The National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC),

enacted as part of the 1993 Defense Authorization Act was modeled after the depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps and U.S. military service (p. 19).

Service learning is a form of experiential learning whose pedagogy rests on the principles established by Dewey and other experiential learning theorists early in the twentieth century (Furco, 1996). In the experiential learning model, students learn through their encounters and experiences and from making meaning or transforming their experiences into abstract conceptualizations (Sheckley & Keeton, 1997). Teachers, administrators and parents have come to understand that when service is linked to learning and placed at the core of the curriculum, the combination exposes the student to a multifaceted education experience (NSLP, 2004).

Service learning provides a multifaceted learning experience through its key elements:

- Reflection
- Reciprocity
- Community connection

Reflection is integral to the service learning experience. It is widely accepted among educators involved with community service programs that reflection is an important factor in promoting students' personal and soci-moral development (Leming, 2001). Reflection in a service learning experience provides students and teachers with a way to look back at their experience (RMC Research Corporation, 2003). In summarizing the role of reflection in his doctoral dissertation, Al-Ansari (2003) states:

Reflection is recognized in a service learning process of meaning making from which students select observations from community experiences, find relationships, recognize patterns, analyze, generalize, and interpret. There are two pedagogical methods through which reflection is usually undertaken in service learning courses: journaling and discussion...By

journaling students would be able to engage, at a personal level, in reflective thinking, during which they integrate experiential learning with classroom learning...Reflection is most profound when it is done aloud with the aware and attention of another person...Service learning should provide an opportunity for students to engage in a reflective discussion (p. 17).

Reciprocity is another element of service learning programs. In order for a service learning experience to be beneficial, both students and recipients must cooperate together to reach a desired goal. Pompa (2002) states that the concept of relationship implies a connection, an interchange, reciprocity between people and everyone involved in a service learning encounter. Additionally, Pompa (2002) asserts that the interaction and dialogue that takes place between and among those involved is multi-dimensional in character. In sum, reciprocity in service learning is about mutual engagement and relationship building with students and the recipient. Additionally, reciprocity also includes the involvement of students in their learning experiences. Students should be given the responsibility to make decisions regarding their learning. "It requires educators to think of students not as future citizens, but as active members of their community. It means that students live the democratic process rather than being taught about democracy" (McCarthy & Corbin, 2003, p. 52).

The community connection element provides students an opportunity to use knowledge and skills to solve real-world problems in their community. The community connection element of service learning invites community members into the educational environment while allowing students into the community outside their schools (McCarthy & Corbin, 2003). Providing students with an opportunity to use skills and knowledge in real-life situations, therefore extending learning beyond the classroom and into the community (NSLC, 2000). Zlotkowski

(1998) states that by linking the classroom to the world of practice, it allows an induction to complement personal deduction, discovery to challenge received truths, immediate experience to balance generalization and abstract theory. Claus and Ogden (1999) also note that service learning can contribute to the development of an improved sense of community, both among the youth involved and within the communities served.

Service Learning Outcomes

“Researchers consistently report a heightened sense of personal and social responsibility, more positive attitudes toward adults, more active exploration of careers, enhanced self-esteem, growth in moral and ego development, more complex patterns of thought, and greater mastery of skills and content that are directly related to the experience of the participants in the service learning programs” (Sheckley & Keeton, 1997, p. 22). Research in this field has not caught up with the certainty and passion that educators feel for service learning (Learning In Deed, 2004). The National Center for Education Statistics used a Fast Response Survey System to conduct a national *Student Service Learning and Community Service Survey* in spring 1999. The purpose of this national survey was to provide a national estimate on the percentage of public elementary, middle and high schools incorporating service learning into their curriculum. Most schools with service learning cited strengthening relationships among students, the school and the community as key reasons for practicing service learning. The survey revealed that sixty-four percent of all public schools, including eighty-three percent of public high schools, had students participating in community service activities recognized and/or arranged through the school. The survey further revealed that fifty-seven percent of all public schools organized service learning activities

for their students and thirty-two percent of those schools had it as part of their curriculum. Of the schools with service learning programs, eighty-three percent offered some type of support to teachers interested in integrating service learning into the curriculum.

To further advance the case for service learning in schools, Learning In Deed (2004) completed a meta-analysis of national service learning studies to determine the outcomes and impact of service learning programs across the U.S. This meta-analysis identified core areas for noticeable or measurable change as: personal and social development, civic responsibility and impact on schools and on communities. In the area of personal and social development, students who engaged in quality service learning programs showed increased measures in social responsibility. Service learning students also showed increased self-esteem, had greater cognitive flexibility and acceptance of cultural diversity. Civic responsibility is another core impact area that the Learning In Deed (2004) meta-analysis identified. Over 80 percent of participants in high quality service learning programs felt that they had made a positive contribution to the community. Service learning students believed that they could make a difference and showed an increased awareness of local community needs. With an increased understanding of how government works, service learning students were more likely to think about politics and morality as it related to society. Service learning programs provide students with an opportunity to take ownership in their communities by becoming members of community-based organizations. In reference to impact in the classroom, students feel more connected to their teachers and their schools. Finally, teachers and schools with service learning suggest improved relationships between students and the community.

High School Pyramid Model

The implementation and dimensions of service learning programs are diverse. Service learning programs range from school-wide service learning initiatives that involve every student in the school, to grade-specific service-learning, which involves all students in one or more grades, or to service-learning as part of an individual course (NCES, 1999). The goals, objectives, resources, and administrative support largely determine how a school may structure its service learning program. The distinctive element of service learning is that it enhances the community through the service provided, but it also has powerful learning consequences for the students or other participating in providing a service (NSLC, 1999). The High School Pyramid is the service learning implementation model utilized by Forest Park Senior High School.

Forest Park Senior High School is located in a suburban community approximately 27 miles south of Washington, D.C. Having opened in September 2000, Forest Park Senior High School rests on a seven-acre campus with approximately 2500 students in grades 9th -12th.

Part of a larger county wide initiative, Forest Park is the home to the Center for Information Technology in Prince William County, Virginia that provides information technology support, mentoring, and tutoring to its community. In a modern, newly constructed building, equipped with state-of-the-art equipment, Forest Park offers:

- Faculty and staff who are committed to service learning
- 600 networked computers
- Twenty wireless computer labs with Windows 2000 and XP technology
- Five computer drops in every classroom with CAT 5 100 MB Ethernet network
- Observatory lab with two telescopes

Forest Park's mission is to graduate students who are comfortable with and proficient using information technology in all forms, which will enable them to interact with individuals, organizations and agencies in a technologically driven economy. Forest Park is unique because it offers vocational preparation tracks in addition to advanced placement classes leading to a standard or an advanced studies diploma. Coupled with an intensive, school-wide service learning curriculum, both options prepare students for college entrance or workforce upon graduation.

Forest Park has two major programs that make its academic offerings different from any other high school in its local school district. The Information Technology (IT) Program and Learn n' Serve program both embody the principles and attributes of service learning. Both programs have been strategically aligned to meet Virginia's Standards of Learning. It has state accredited service learning classes that offer high school credit for participation. The service learning is focused on providing services to high school pyramid feeder schools and the greater community.

The IT program is a four-year technology-rich program that partners students with local businesses and organization in the local community. Immersing students in authentic, real-world projects, the IT Program offers standard and advanced diplomas to students. In addition to a diploma, participating students also could earn a certificate in one of the following areas:

- Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA)
- ProTech Cabling and Fiber Certification
- Allen Academy of Multimedia Computer Graphics Cert.
- A+ Curriculum

Students who are enrolled in the IT Program will take classes in three core curricular areas such as: graphics-multimedia, engineering-networking and math-programming. Provided below is a sampling of what classes Forest Park students need to meet diploma requirements.

Graphics/Multimedia

- Graphics Design I (9th grade)
- IT Computer Graphics I, II (10th, 11th grade)
- IT Multimedia Software Design and Development I & II (11th & 12th grade)

Engineering/Networking

- IT Foundations of Technology (9th grade)
- Computer Systems Technology (A+ curriculum) (10th grade)
- It Network Design and Engineering I, II, III, & IV (Cisco Academy)
 - (11th and 12th grade)

Math/Programming

- Computer Math (9th grade)
- ADV Geometry (9th grade)
- AP Computer Science I (10th grade)
- AP Computer Science II (11th grade)
- Advanced Computer Studies

Other Core Courses

- IT Computer Applications (9th grade)
- Desktop Multimedia I, II
- Learn and Serve (10-12th grade)
- Astronomy (12th grade)
- IT Intern (11th, and 12th grade)

Students enrolled in the IT Program gain knowledge, skills and discipline necessary to be competitive in a technologically driven economy. Through the service learning component, students learn how to solve problems, develop critical thinking, and work collaboratively on multidisciplinary projects with the guidance of teachers and practitioners.

The Learn n' Serve program at Forest Park is an outreach and community service arm of Prince William County, Virginia. Learn n' Serve is a service-learning program that began Fall 2003 whose primary goal is to provide high school students with authentic learning experiences through service to their high school and community. For example, students design in-house brochures, and provide technical and network support to teachers and administrators. Moreover, Learn n' Serve aims to develop an appreciation for the concept of service to the community and to develop skills necessary to evaluate the impact of service to others. And finally, Learn n' Serve seeks to identify needs for community service beyond the school environment by making school facilities available to the greater community after school and on weekends.

Forest Park students enroll in a state accredited service-learning class, which teaches them the fundamentals of community service and volunteerism. This course is also designed to meet the standards of learning (SOL) for the state of Virginia. Participating students are expected to provide computer technology support, tutoring and mentoring services to area middle and elementary schools, which will develop citizenship and leadership qualities.

The service learning model implemented by Forest Park is referred to as the High School Pyramid. The High School Pyramid model uses the feeder school system or top-down approach of providing services to schools through their district. In the Pyramid model, high schools provide services to middle schools, which in turn provide services to elementary schools. Services may include but are not limited to tutoring, technical assistance, professional development, and administrative support.

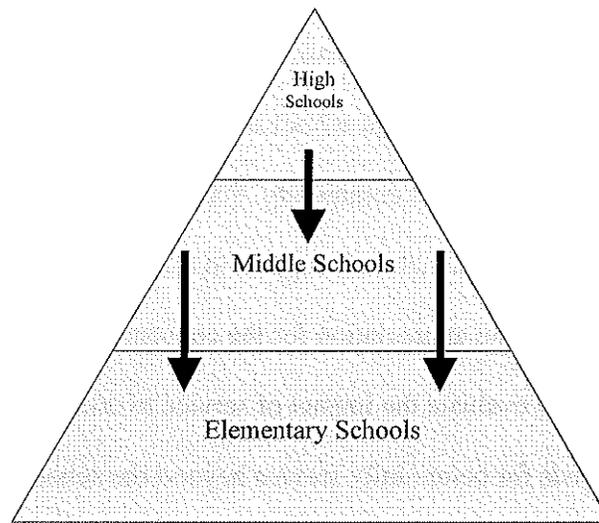


Figure 1: High School Pyramid Model

Forest Park shares its students, teachers, and technology expertise with the middle and elementary feeder schools. The high school trains its service learning students in teaching and mentoring and provides all other skills necessary to provide service to the feeder schools and the greater community. The high school students collaborate on projects with middle and elementary schools in the community. Interacting with others promotes responsibility, trustworthiness, and helps students improved their ability to analyze complex tasks and make decisions.

High school students enrolled in service learning courses or programs are responsible for providing services to area middle and elementary schools under the guidance of teachers. In this model the student plays a significant role in working with others to perform tasks that both the student and the community regard as worthwhile and needed.

Forest Park implements this service learning model through the use of technology. One program at Forest Park, matches high school students with middle and elementary schools for

technical support. Students Working to Advance Technology (SWAT) is one of the service learning programs at Forest Park. The SWAT team obtains computers and equipment through a nonprofit partnership with The Scholastic Technology Infusion Corporation (STIC). The SWAT team, coordinates rebuilding of recycled computers, which are then donated to assist needy students, both in the classroom and in the community. To take it a step further, Forest Park provides resources to the technology learning centers (TLC) in the community. The resources include recycled hardware, networking services, and connectivity support. The TLCs offer homework assistance, a project-based curriculum, and relationship building opportunities throughout the community at the administrative, teacher, and student levels. (PWCS, April 2004).

Features of the High School Pyramid Model include (not in any particular order):

- 1. Accreditation:** The high school has a state accredited service learning program with classes that offer high school credit for their participation. The service learning program is focused on providing services to schools in the pyramid feeder system (middle & elementary) as well as the greater community.
- 2. Curriculum:** The high school has identified curricular areas that can be deployed through the service learning program. Examples include Mobil SWAT, multimedia promotion, computer graphics, environmental education, and assistive technology/special education.
- 3. Buy-In:** Administrators (school & district) and parents support the implementation of the service learning program throughout the feeder schools and in the greater community by providing their ongoing support and involvement.
- 4. Relationships:** The high school takes the lead in developing relationships between and among the feeder schools and the greater community. Consensus is reached on the goals and possible outcomes of the service learning program. Once consensus is achieved efforts feeder schools and community are promoted and publicized.
- 5. Resources:** The high school develops and uses available community resources, including local businesses, government, nonprofits, and individuals, to provide funding, equipment, volunteers, mentoring, and internships. The community can also benefit from the use of

resources of schools in the Pyramid such as: facilities for meetings and events, computer labs, and libraries.

6. Needs: The high school service learning classes work with the feeder schools and the community to determine and document their needs, and then identify those needs which the program can address.

7. Professional Development: The high school supports and encourages professional development of the teachers to teach service learning classes and other curricular activities implemented through service learning. Additionally, high school students are also trained in tutoring, mentoring, and other skills required for them to implement their service learning program in the feeder schools and in the community.

8. Coordination: The high school coordinates the service learning efforts with all feeder schools through designated points of contact. These points of contact may include teachers, administrators, and community members.

9. Documentation: The processes for coordinating and implementing the service learning program should be captured and documented through annual reports, “how-to” videos, handbooks, etc. This information could be useful for program replication or scaling, and requests for funding and support.

Conclusion

Service learning is a pedagogical model that links classroom learning with real-world activities. The elements of service learning are reflection, reciprocity and community connection. Advocates of service learning today embrace service learning as a strategy to enhance students’ awareness of social issues within their community.

The High School Pyramid model is significant because it embodies the major elements of service learning using a hierarchical feeder school system. This model builds on reflection, reciprocity, and community connection through community engagement and commitment, reflects on the service learning attributes. This model significantly benefits students because it enables them to make connection between the knowledge they are acquiring in the classroom and

its application in their community. The Pyramid model does not have to be implemented in its entirety, but may utilize aspects of the model that apply to a particular school or community situation. This allows for flexibility in implementation and for ability of schools to grow their service learning efforts based on their resources and goals. Outcomes of the High School Pyramid model may include but are not limited to: improved relations between schools and communities, more efficient/effective use of school and community resources, better student engagement in school curriculum, and improved parental and community involvement in schools.

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