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# Bridging the Gap: Connecting School and Community with Service Learning

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# Bridging the Gap: Connecting School and Community with Service Learning

SARAH K. EDWARDS

**W**hy do I even look for teaching ideas in the education catalogs that fill my mailbox? I know that these offerings of prefabricated units and generic novel activities will not satisfy the desires of my students. Looking around my orderly classroom, I confess that I am probably the only one who adores the posters with colorful scenes from my favorite poems. During my past ten years as an English teacher, I have found myself in a mental tug-of-war as to how to connect my students with the state curriculum standards. Finally, in the abyss of Internet lessons and teaching seminars, I finally found a way to

honor the knowledge and experience of my students. Through the use of inquiry-based instruction, which utilized family literacy events and community service learning, my students were able to accomplish much more than the prescribed state curriculum; they learned how to promote tolerance in their community.

Innovative researchers such as Nieto and Ladson-Billings have long called for the connection of school and community. These thinkers have identified the need for students of all backgrounds to feel connected to their education. This connection begins by bridging the gap between the two places where students spend their time: the school and the community in which they most identify themselves. John Dewey clearly identifies this dilemma when he describes the frustration of students who try to apply to daily life what they've learned in school. Effective teachers know that the first step to bridging this gap begins with considering the students' experiences and the society in which they live. Effective teaching comes when students seek a tangible goal they themselves have set.

For me, the first step was to stop assuming my community experience would be similar to that of my students, and to begin asking students to de-

fine and seek their own relevant goals. What started as inquiry-based instruction soon blossomed into student-based community learning. The projects were *of* the community and *for* the community. These students knew, much better than I, what was needed and how to go about fulfilling those needs. Their project started by bringing the community to our school with an art exhibit of tolerance. It continued as the students volunteered at a nearby elementary school and eventually branched out with community gardens to fulfill a neighborhood need. The inquiry ended with activities that brought the school and neighborhood together in celebration as a new desert habitat park was created. Who would have thought that an eighth grade language arts class could be so productive? This year's portfolios contained photographs of our park, letters of appreciation from community leaders, and a multitude of writing that varied from grant proposals to family histories.

## Attacking the Gap

Looking back at my early confusion of how to combine student experience with state curriculum standards, it is easy to understand why I was feeling so divided. I had not yet considered the benefits of

combining inquiry-based instruction with service learning. While I understood the joys and benefits of volunteering and reflection, I had never considered incorporating this type of experience into the reading, writing, and critical thinking activities in my classroom. Like many other teachers, much of my knowledge of the classroom, as Lortie explains, has come from my “apprenticeship of experience” as a student. My school experience certainly did not involve any volunteering in conjunction with academics. The only type of volunteering that I remember in the context of school was done in conjunction with student council groups. Volunteering was what I did outside of the school day.

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Service learning differs from volunteer work in one major way: it includes the element of reflection. Projects are organized to meet the needs of the community, then integrated into the curriculum. After the projects are completed, the students are given the opportunity to reflect on the service experience. Service learning provides them with the chance to actively participate in thoughtfully organized experiences that are integrated into existing academic curricula. This type of learning provides students with the opportunity not only to engage in volunteer projects, but also to talk, think, and write about the experience as well.

While I knew that the community was a source of pertinent teaching materials and ideas, I was unsure of how to harness this resource. My early attempts to provide relevant experiences were actually tokenistic stabs. I would bring in an outstanding African American poet or load up the yellow buses to go to a Jewish Community Center for an exhibit during our study of the Holocaust. At the time, I thought I was helping my students to see the connections, but perhaps what was really happening was that I was attempting to satisfy my own desire to make links. I was assuming that *my* community was *my students'* community. Did my students relate to

the African American poetry, or did I? Who chose the Holocaust exhibit as a place to visit? Was I making these connections because they were relevant to the students or because they were relevant to me?

### Determining Our Strengths

Our school's motto for the year was “Building Bridges,” which fit perfectly into my curriculum based on the theme of tolerance. I've found that this overall theme provides an excellent framework for subtopics such as identity, justice, and equity. Having used the topic of tolerance before, I had already amassed a collection of books, articles, songs, movies, and poems. What I hadn't done before was to move the ideas from rhetoric into action. Rather than just providing armfuls of examples to get my point across, this time I decided to ask the students to look to themselves and their families and bring in their personal stories.

As a background to determining our own familial cultural histories, we read individual and community stories, fiction and nonfiction, to open discussions of social behavior. These texts examined historical incidents involving issues such as racism and homophobia that, as Kozol explains, are often ignored or watered down in traditional classrooms. For example, students were introduced to Ken Mochizuki's *Baseball Saved Us*, which draws on his family's experience in a Japanese American internment camp during the 1940s. Following the read-aloud, Abbey responded emotionally to the book when she wrote, “I'm so shocked I haven't heard of these camps.” The students' concerns stimulated a natural inquiry. Max asked, “If we are taught in school about the wrongdoings of slavery, what about these Japanese internment camps?” Through comments such as these, it is evident that the students were able to raise the level of discussion from mere information to critical questioning. Gina responded, “Like many others now and during that time, I'm forced to ask why. It is amazing that through all of the horrible things that occurred, people still found the ability to look at the bright side.”

This critical questioning inspired students to uncover family and community stories of events surrounding the book by Mochizuki. The follow-up assignment specifically pushed the students toward their families as a source of information. They conducted interviews with older family members in connection to history, through questions such as these:

What do you know about the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII? Were you alive at the time? If so, where were you? What were you doing? Did you go to the camps or know anyone who did? If not, did you know it was happening? If you were born after the period, when did you learn about the internment? Was it in school? What did you learn?

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hate as roots of intolerance  
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Students returned to school with stories and artifacts shared by their elders. In a quiet voice, Kim described her grandfather's experience as an educator at Tule Lake in California. She shared a recent newspaper article featuring a memorial trip to the camp and noted her grandfather's unfulfilled desire to make the camps public knowledge. He attempted to take photographs to document the experience but was ultimately censored. In his later years, Kim's grandfather wrote a book about the camps; however, his manuscript was never published. With her discovery of her personal relationship to the history, Kim saw her writing as a chance to speak for, and with, her deceased grandfather.

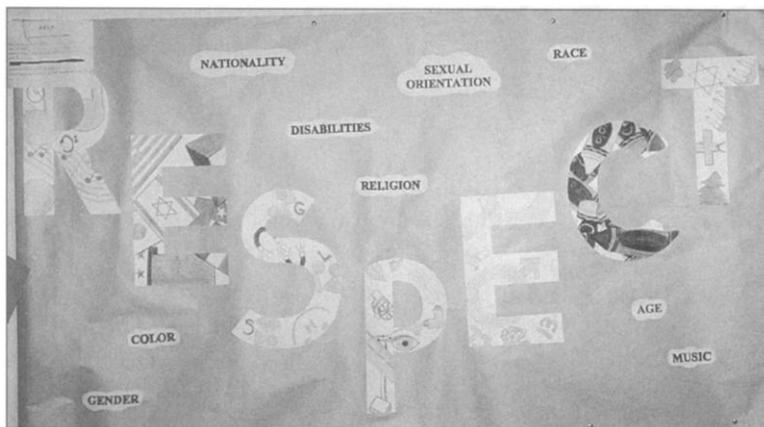
This connection with family to determine individual cultural strengths continued. Writing work-

shops, in the fashion of Atwell, showcased literature by, of, and for the students' families. The texts in the room took on a new meaning as reference materials, rather than artifacts. The process of how to conduct an interview was taken from the district's adopted textbook, as were sample autobiographical and biographical writings. Through this writing, family stories and biographies were chronicled and shared with classmates, as each class compiled a class book of family stories of both tolerance and intolerance. In addition to the topics being generated by family members, students took various drafts home in search of corrections of both the content and mechanics. Parents, aunts, and even younger siblings provided feedback and edited the manuscripts before they were published.

These topics brought a sense of authenticity to our study of language arts. The stories opened up topics for conversation that previously were unheard in our classroom. Discussions of greed, fear, and hate as roots of intolerance alternately fired up the students and hushed them into silence. We continued to read and watch other examples of both tolerance and intolerance to broaden our understanding of the roots of this type of social behavior, but we were feeling as if the examples of intolerance were more readily found in both our stories and our society. It was time to do something about our uneasiness.

### Opening Our Doors

One theme, in particular, continued to be a strong force in fighting intolerance. That concept was the breaking down of communication barriers and becoming educated about other's perspectives. Most of our documented family stories and memories of intolerance were rooted in ignorance or miscommunication. The stories of tolerance all began with communication. We decided that it was time to start looking at the community around us. Sara commented, "Younger children just don't see many examples of tolerance. Maybe we should begin by fighting the images of intolerance from the television with our own examples of peace." She was right. We could start by inviting



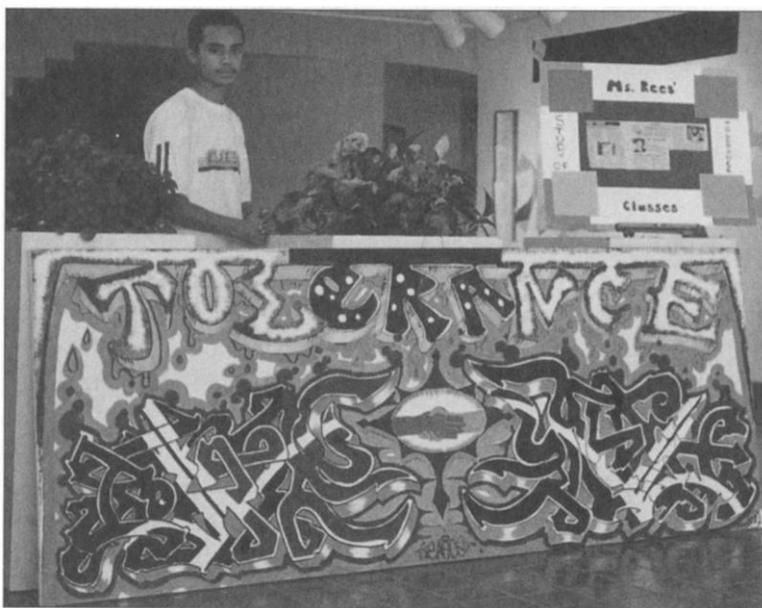
Tolerance exhibit.

the local community into our school to see that we were concerned with the issue.

After large and small group discussions, each student designed a graphic representation of tolerance. One of the school's art teachers gave us a mini-lesson on artistic elements such as texture, color, and shading, and we were on our way. As our final products were taking shape, we wrote poetry to accompany the art. We also wrote letters to area schools and news organizations, inviting them to tour our exhibit. It was barely up when the first school group arrived. A centerpiece for the poetry and life-size graphics was a 12' x 4' tolerance mural that had been created by one student to satisfy both a grade for my class and a project grade for his art class. One newspaper, two television stations, three school board members, and multiple school groups later, we deemed our display a success.

### Visiting Our Neighbors

Feeling confident with this success in our own territory, we started to look around for other projects we could do that would take us outside the school's walls. An elementary school just two blocks away offered a chance for us to share our literacy and communicate our newfound message of education as a means to tolerance. Our middle school is a performing arts magnet and therefore caters to students from all over the city. Drawing in students from different neighborhoods has created a balance of stu-



Cesar Ruiz at the tolerance mural.

dents from various cultures, religions, levels of poverty, and ethnicities, but it has also excluded the predominant neighborhood culture, as those living in the neighborhood are bussed across town. The nearby elementary school, on the other hand, is not under the same desegregation policies and so does not receive the same amount of funding as the middle school. The two schools have a long-standing history of animosity.

In thinking about the inequities of the two schools and the effects of those differences, we discussed the recently publicized low reading test scores of the elementary students. As we talked about how people learn to read and just how important reading skills are for success in life, we decided to pair up with any student who would like to have a reading tutor. The elementary teachers were perhaps most excited at the initial prospect, but as the students became more comfortable with each other, the learning blossomed. Once a week, for one semester, we tramped down the sidewalk to the elementary school to meet up with our reading buddies. Back in our own classroom, we started to talk about reading strategies that "good readers" use to decode text. These very same strategies, such as prediction and inference, that I had been fruitlessly trying to teach earlier in the year, suddenly became quite important as my students were now the teachers.

This real opportunity to make a difference in someone else's education brought about classroom discussions of self-respect. With a raise in students' self-esteem comes a sense of ability that leads to academic achievement. Students who are involved in peer tutoring programs such as this one often see improvement in their own coursework. Education started to become more personal to both my students and those with whom we worked each Tuesday. The students celebrated their accomplishments together by giving books as presents, creating bookmarks with encouraging statements, and writing update letters of improvement to elementary teachers and parents. This initial link not only started a deluge of project possibilities to bridge the lives of the very different students, but also offered the

communication that we know helps to bring people together in spirit.

### Reaching Out to Residents

A little publicity can sometimes go a long way. Knowing that we were interested in working in the community, our next opportunity came to our classroom door. A woman who worked for the Community Food Bank in our neighborhood wanted to help area residents plant and maintain a garden. When my students and I talked about the lack of supermarkets in the area, it made sense to market the idea of community vegetable gardens to residents in the neighborhood. We walked door to door, handing out flyers in both English and Spanish as we explained that we were willing to provide the seedlings and muscle needed to start the gardens, if residents were willing to water and maintain them. Soon families took us up on the offer.

In conjunction with a science class from our school, we researched information on soil, water, and plants native to the area. Community volunteers helped us gather the plants and shovels needed for the job. After lots of digging, sweat, and time, we were rewarded with some excellent salsa from one of the gardens. Our classroom storybook also grew as we interviewed and documented the family stories of some of the people we met while we were collecting and distributing recipe ideas for the residents. Reading about and planning for the gardens required a great deal of critical thinking, but the most impressive ideas were found in the students' journals, where they recorded and reflected on the work of helping others create food for their families.

### Working Together

With each part of our tolerance project, we continued to reflect on the changes we had observed within ourselves, our classroom, and our community. That critical reflection helped the students to feel confident in suggesting projects that would continue our mission of promoting tolerance. While outside during a fire drill, Tyreece asked, "What's that empty lot going to be used for?" The class agreed to investigate the best use of the school-owned property and decided that the neighborhood and school would benefit from having a desert habitat that provided a gathering place for people. Our community park began to take form, as students contacted and corresponded with building supply

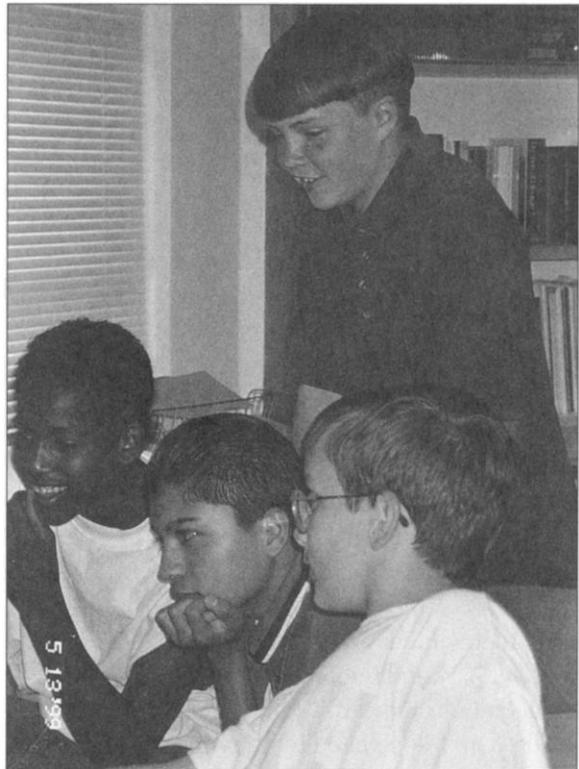
companies for donations, utility companies for digging instructions, and district maintenance office personnel to request services.

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After lots of digging, sweat,  
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The letter-writing campaign continued as local nurseries were asked to provide trees and shrubs. As the project became public, an area technology school volunteered to build a ramada to provide shade. As with any community project, not every student was involved in the same manner. Some students read about similar projects, while others worked on grant writing or newspaper articles to



From left, Patrick Sherfield, Jesus Celaya, Matt Shaw, and Brian Williams (standing) work in class at the computer.

share our progress. This type of writing supported the students' prior experience with process writing, as they continued to edit and revise the letters they sent. No longer was writing something that only I assigned and read. It was done to either communicate a desire or share an experience. Isn't that what writing is supposed to be?

### Learning in a Community

Connecting the school and community requires investigating both what we are doing and how we are doing it. We cannot simply change the way we teach without examining whom we are teaching. Bringing in an occasional speaker or visiting an exhibit at a city museum only starts the process of bridging the gap of relevance. Connecting the school and the community means listening to the community in which the school is situated, so that the individual voices of those students and of that school can be the foundation of the education those students receive. All students deserve to be more than just the passive recipients of what they consider irrelevant information taught in a disjointed fashion.

It was initially frightening to consider teaching without a master plan. Infusing skills and standards as the year progressed, rather than working from mapped out benchmarks, requires constant reflection and organization. Departing from my comfortable reading groups and stock writing instruction took more than simple courage. It required creativity to allow the students to invent the projects, while I upheld my promise to the district to provide language arts instruction that would raise my students' test scores as they prepared to enter high school. More important than being prepared for their high school classes, however, is the knowledge that these students know how to make a difference in their community. Tyreece mentioned how proud he'll feel someday when he drives past our park and remembers all that he accomplished during his eighth grade year. I don't need to wait until that day. I'm proud of my students right now.

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"I'VE EMPHASIZED THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY IN COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES, I'VE TOLD MY STUDENTS THAT ALL WRITERS FORM A COMMUNITY, AND I'VE INSTILLED IN THEM THE NOTION THAT ALL READERS JOIN IN A LITERARY COMMUNITY..."



Richard A. Williams

"NOW, I CAN HARDLY WAIT TO GIVE THEM BACK TO THE COMMUNITY FOR SUMMER VACATION!"

