

Fall 1999

Reading, Writing and Service Learning

National Helpers Network, Inc.

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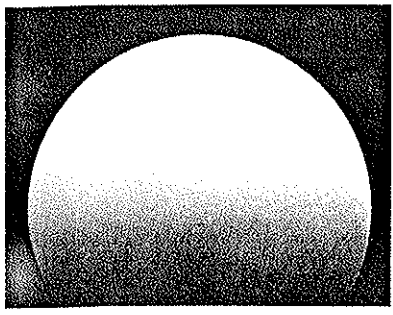
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Youth Roles

NATIONAL HELPERS NETWORK, INC.

Reading, Writing and Service Learning

Cross-age tutoring programs, like the National Helpers Network's "Helpers Promoting Literacy" model, in which middle and high school students serve as reading tutors to younger children, have been popular fixtures in many school service learning programs in recent years. Described by many as "win-win" programs because both the "tutors" and the "tutees" improve their reading skills as a result of participating, these programs are often integrated into English and language arts curricula and give students the opportunity to learn by teaching. But a look at programs throughout the nation shows that service learning practitioners are expanding on that idea and finding many creative ways to help students build their own reading and writing skills through service.

In Madison, Wisconsin at Malcolm Shabazz City High School, where every student is engaged in some sort of service learning activity, English and art students collaborate to create personalized story books for kindergarten students in a local elementary school as a way of cultivating the children's budding reading skills. But for Shabazz English teacher Colleen Kellogg, a major goal of the program is to get her students to take their writing more seriously and really work at the writing process. "We struggle to find authentic learning experiences for students, but this has been one of the few authentic writing processes I've witnessed," said Ms Kellogg. "It is so hard to get students to *continued on page 6*

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Reading and writing are two of the great joys of my life. So as we sat down for our editorial meeting over the summer to decide on a theme for this issue of *Community Youth Roles*, I found myself asking how service learning programs can, along with all of the other wonderful things they do, inspire "Helpers" to become better readers and writers.

I think that focusing on literacy skills is an extremely appropriate theme for the start of a new school year. The undeniable fact is that if children aren't literate, they absolutely won't be successful in school. And, although service learning is our particular specialty, school success is a goal we all share as educators.

Many service learning programs have a literacy focus in that they specifically engage students in literacy activities through tutoring or reading aloud to younger students, but I wanted to get practitioners thinking about how *any* service learning *continued on page 2*

Reading, Writing and Service Learning

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rewrite their work when I am the only audience, but knowing this is going to be given to a child really motivates them. Suddenly grammar and punctuation are important. It makes them look at their work again and again.”

6 The students in Ms. Kellogg’s English class study children’s literature, learn about story structure, review early reading vocabulary and write their own children stories. One of those stories is written specifically for a child in a kindergarten class at a local elementary school. Working in collaboration with an art student, each English student interviews a child in the class to learn more about the child’s likes and dislikes, then writes a story specifically for him or her, incorporating details like the child’s favorite animal, color or activities.

Once the story is written, the art students take the story and illustrate it, using painting, drawing, collage, photography and even “claymation.” “When we think about literacy, often we think it’s just about the written word,” said art teacher Martha Vasquez. “But it’s also about pictures and matching pictures to words. The art has to match the writing and help readers make sense of the story.” At the end of the quarter, every child in the kindergarten class is presented with their own beautiful book and the high school students are the first to read it to

them. This year, Spanish students are also participating, enabling students to present their stories in both Spanish and English.

In a similar book-creation project in Vancouver, Washington, bilingual middle school students have written dual language story books, then donated them to newly-arrived immigrant mothers to encourage them to read to their children. And at Sauk Prairie Middle School in Wisconsin, 8th grade students with poor reading skills are working with elementary-level ESL students to develop books around themes that were important to both groups, such as family, friends, community, school and the river. Students interviewed adults and younger bilingual students to determine what information to include in the books, and discussed the reading problems both older and younger students were having.

Many intergenerational service programs — which connect students to seniors at area nursing homes and senior centers — also incorporate a good deal of reading and writing. Students often read to elders on their visits or interview residents about historic events in their lifetime and use what they learn to create oral histories. Pen-pal programs, in which students and seniors exchange letters — or in some cases e-mail — over the course of the year are also popular ways to get students

reading and writing. At Lindenhurst Middle School in Long Island, New York, “Puppy Love” is a unique intergenerational pet therapy program in which students bring their dogs along on visits to a local nursing home, giving residents the opportunity to pet and cuddle the friendly animals. But the program also has a reading and writing component. Before visiting with seniors, students read the popular book, *Chicken Soup for the Pet Lover’s Soul*, which is a compilation of stories by pet lovers who share how their pets have touched their lives. At the nursing home, students pair up with seniors to read aloud from the book. Students also use the seniors as primary sources of research on 20th century history, interviewing them on specific decades in history and writing about what they have learned. For an assignment called “Letters from the Trunk,” they assume the persona of the senior and write letters from them as though they were living in a specific time period and sharing what life is like. As is the case for most of these programs, writing in reflection journals is an ongoing activity.

“Sometimes it can be such a struggle to get students to write anything,” says Gary Whiffen, the English teacher who coordinates the program in Lindenhurst, along with social studies teacher Gail Wench. “When you can offer a personal experience — something students

are really interested in — they have a lot more to say. And service learning gives students that personal experience and motivation.”

Other intergenerational programs with a reading and writing focus include the “Senior Book Buddies” program at St. Anthony Middle School in Fargo, North Dakota. For this program, middle school students are paired with seniors who live independently in the community to read books in partnership with one another and then write to each other every two weeks about their impressions of the books. And at Brewster High School in Brewster, Washington, English students visit seniors at a local retirement community and write biographical poems about them.

Service learning is also finding its way into literature classrooms, as teachers discover that getting students out into the community can help them gain a better grasp of the themes covered in the fiction they are reading. During a class reading of John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl*, students at Lindenhurst Middle School explored how they could affect the lives of people less fortunate than they are. As a result, students made soup for a local soup kitchen and organized a “Big Help” effort that provided food to ten neighborhood food pantries. And in Frederick County, Maryland, high school English students at Middletown High School read books based on a particular theme and then do service that matches that theme. For example, one year the class theme was “tolerance” and the students read books such as *The Contender*, by Robert Lipsyte, a 1960’s novel about teens living in Harlem, *Night*, by Elie Wiesel, an autobiography of a young Jewish boy’s experiences during the Holocaust and William Gibson’s *The Miracle Worker*, which chronicles Helen Keller’s struggle with multiple disabilities. Then, students paired up with students with disabilities from a partner school to engage in joint activities, including recreation, community service projects, a dance, field trips and holiday celebrations. “All of our English classes are literature-based. Writing and vocabulary revolve around the literature we read,” said Gwen Burcker, assistant principal, and former service learning coordinator and English teacher. “So when we decided to do service learning, it made sense to link it with literature too.”

In another class at Middletown, students read Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth* and visit a local nursing home to meet with the elderly, talk about gardening, and then plant flower beds at the center. “In *The Good Earth*, our relationship to the land and the importance of elders in the family relationship are critical themes. The service activity really gave us the opportunity to discuss these themes and explore them,” said Ms. Burcker. “Service learning makes it personal. It helps our students relate to what they are reading, which is imperative. The student has to feel that this is important to their lives. I believe that is what service learning does best.” ●

Info Alert

WEB RESOURCES:

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication

www.indiana.edu/~eric_rec/

Provides access to listservs, bibliographies, lesson plans, and other educational materials for teachers of reading.

America Reads

www.cns.gov/areads/index.html

A program of the Corporation for National Service, devoted to helping parents and educators expand on successful literacy programs.

Bank Street College

Preparing for America Reads Challenge

www.bnkst.edu/americanreads

Provides reading tutors with a variety of information, ranging from background information on literacy and early reading, sample lesson plans, activities and information on other literacy and reading resources.

OPPORTUNITIES

“Larger Than Life” Awards

Sponsored By Sears, Roebuck and Co., Youth Service America and the Backstreet Boys, the “Larger Than Life” Awards, will recognize 36 young people, 9-20 years old, who are improving their communities through volunteer service. Each of the 36 award winners will receive \$2,000 to fund a project for National Youth Service Day 2000 as well as four tickets to see the Backstreet Boys in concert and backstage. Two grand prize winners will be selected from the initial 36 winners to receive \$10,000 for their volunteer organizations. Applications are available on-line at www.servenet.org/awards or by calling (202) 296-2992.

EVENTS

1999 Regional Conferences on Improving America’s Schools

The US Department of Education
Salt Lake City, UT, November 8-10
Chicago, IL, December 15-17
Call 1-800-203-5494 .

1999 NSEE Conference

San Diego, October 20-23
Call Lisa Rhodes at 919-787-3263
or info@nsee.org

3rd Annual Healthy Communities-Healthy Youth Conference

Search Institute,
Denver, CO,
November 11-13
Call Janice Mills at 1-800-888-7828

Martin Luther King Day of Service

The Corporation for National Service
January 17, 2000
Call 202-606-5000 or e-mail mlk@cns.gov