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Alec J. Allen

Martin L. Mitchell

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Helping The Community: An Untapped Resource for Troubled Children

ALEC J. ALLEN and MARTIN L. MITCHELL

"Service learning is one way of allowing youth to improve their self concepts through giving of themselves to others in need."

National Information Center
for Service Learning
1954 Buford Ave, Room R290
St. Paul, MN 55108-8197

Alec J. Allen is director of personnel and Martin L. Mitchell is vice-president of programming for the Starr Commonwealth Schools.

All too often adults have cornered the market on helping. They work within voluntary organizations and church groups to meet the needs of the community. For many this service continues within their jobs as educators and social service providers. Occasionally a place is set aside for youth to participate. The challenge becomes how to involve troubled youth in helping others to reap the benefits popularized in the phrase "It is more blessed to give than to receive." If there is strength to be derived from giving, then let us be creative in sharing these opportunities with those who have more to gain from the benefits. Service learning is one way of allowing youth to improve their self concepts through giving of themselves to others in need.

The troubled students at Starr Commonwealth School reside in family style living units. They are immersed in a group treatment program coordinated through the teamwork of their teachers, child care workers, and counselors. They share in a carefully planned milieu designed to emphasize the positive values of caring, helping, trusting, and being responsible. The students participate as active treatment change agents. Within their group meetings they become involved in assessment of problems, definition of goals, suggested methods of implementation, and evaluation of success.

The helping process is extended beyond the group meeting as students assist one another in a variety of ways, including support for positive behaviors, completion of daily tasks, aid in meeting academic goals, and assistance with family relationships. The intent is to create a climate of shared concern where youth provide one another with positive peer reinforcement of pro-social behavior. As a young person learns to be of value to others, he increases his own feelings of worthiness and builds a positive self concept.

Through regular service learning projects, the helping process is generalized to other citizens in the community. Students and staff engage in a wide variety of volunteer activities, typically with senior citizens, smaller



Teacher aides at a day care center



children, and the handicapped. Thus a group may help at a nursing home by presenting skits for the residents or provide recreation for disadvantaged children in a Head Start Program. These projects cannot be contrived, artificial, or make-work but must be a genuine response to meeting human needs. The thrust of the group program is to involve students to a greater degree in creating change than in being changed. In reaching out to another person, the student creates his or her own proof of worthiness—being of value to someone (Brendiro & Mitchell, 1981).

How does one convince troubled youth that helping others will ultimately benefit them? One must redirect their beliefs that they only want things for themselves, they don't care for others, and they wish to preserve the image of being tough and fearless. In fact these images can be turned to an advantage. By relabeling the tasks at hand, a challenge is provided which threatens their facade. The following dialogues are examples in creating this challenge:

1. A staff member discussing the idea of working with mentally handicapped children stated, "I know it can be a little frightening at first, but I am sure you can overcome the fear to help these children."

2. When planning to work with physically handicapped children in the 4-H Sitting Tall programs, a staff member shared, "Their safety and success can only be insured through your assistance as guides."

Once engaged in these projects they must be self-fulfilled to the point where they actively seek chances to be of service and help others. Their self-centeredness will now be exhibited through their actual competing for chances to help.

A few opportunities The Starr Commonwealth Schools' students have enjoyed are the following:

- helping students from a school for the blind in activities such as sledging, arts, sports, and in setting up their summer camp



Students rebuilding the Camp Fire Girls' picnic shelter

- tutoring retarded children at a special school
- assisting with the work at a community recycling center
- serving as aides in local day care programs
- working with a local P.T.A. to build an elementary school playground
- raising money through special projects and fasting a meal and contributing the money saved to buy gift baskets for the elderly and needy
- visiting with nursing home shut-ins and performing skits
- doing yard work for senior citizens, including raking leaves, cutting grass, shoveling snow and minor outside home maintenance
- building a picnic shelter to replace a destroyed Camp Fire Girls' shelter

One can cement the feeling of worthiness gained in the above service learning projects with tangible reinforcers. These may include letters of thanks, certificates of recognition, community newspaper coverage, and photographic displays.

One can break the realm of activities in which students participate into two subgroups: Pre-Planned and Spontaneous. A pre-planned service-learning project refers to those activities which are researched and carefully nurtured through an evolutionary process. On the other hand, a spontaneous service-learning project capitalizes on events that occur without notice and require immediate response.

Pre-Planned Project

As an example of a pre-planned project, a group was involved with the Sitting Tall Club, a 4-H Horseback Riding for the Handicappers. Starr staff, recognizing the special needs of handicapped students, investigated whether they could be of assistance to a local county school for the severely handicapped. Through discussions with that school and the local county cooperative-extension service, they discovered the need for reliable volunteers to assist with the Sitting Tall Club. This program helps retarded and physically disabled children to increase their self image and aid in the development of their balance through horseback riding.

To stimulate both an awareness and interest in the Starr students, the extension service staff provided a slide

presentation. Following this presentation was a discussion which culminated in Starr students eagerly volunteering.

The next step was the arrangement of a training session. This provided an opportunity for 4-H staff to instruct both Starr staff and students on how to groom, saddle, and care for the horses. They were also instructed on how to aid the children in mounting and riding horses. Usually one student was required to lead the horse; however, with some children an additional student would walk alongside to aid the child and prevent his falling.

The next step was an actual session—the first of seven. This was often met with anxiety and fear. However, conversation with the children, seeing their smiles, and hearing their laughter quickly broke the ice. Each succeeding session built upon the first. As one student wrote, "I think the next time she will maybe ask a question or even answer a question. It is up to me to start a conversation with her to get her to feel comfortable with talking with me." As students aided each other in the various tasks of preparing the horses, serving as instructors, and cleaning up at the conclusion, the group evolved into a smooth working unit.

As these experiences were completed, there was still a need to integrate the overall learning experience of the students. Teachers achieved this goal with the use of individual diaries. While the material was evaluated and corrected, no grade was given, only credit for completion. The diary served two valuable functions:

1. it provided feedback on how the students were viewing the events
2. it helped to internalize the growth and awareness the students were experiencing

The task, however, is not complete without reinforcers. In this case, there were four:

1. certificates of recognition
2. arm patches which signified the participation of students in Sitting Tall
3. a session during which Starr students rode the horses
4. a feature in the Sitting Tall



Sitting Tall

Newsletter which included pictures of their participation

While many of the payoffs such as improved self image, sensitivity to handicapped children, and newly acquired skills with horses could be predicted, other benefits came as a surprise. The most significant was the new relationship between teacher and students. Since this was truly a joint learning experience many students were able to open up and talk with excitement about their shared experiences. They felt closer to the staff and as a result became more responsive to direction.

Spontaneous Project

A clear example of a spontaneous service-learning project was the Fort Wayne, Indiana flood, which received national coverage. This immediate threat to a neighboring community provided Starr's Van Wert, Ohio campus with an opportunity to be of service. Spontaneously, four groups of students were mobilized to go to the

aid of their neighbors. Students were integrated into an ad hoc organization of individuals fighting against the natural elements. Late into the night they were reinforcing sand dikes in an effort to protect the community.

These youth, once viewed to be incapable of helping others, came away with an immense feeling of pride at having protected a community from major disaster. For many there was a new awareness of how hard and continuously they could labor as well as satisfaction derived from hard work. They were commended with a letter of recognition from the Fort Wayne mayor, and to everyone's delight several students appeared on the CBS Evening News hard at work on the front lines.

One may still ask what benefit is to be gained on behalf of the group and individuals through service learning. While Starr conducted no direct empirical research on this question, feedback of staff and students suggests the following:



Students volunteering at a nursing home

- *the bond and togetherness developed through the collective effort of helping and giving to others carrying over to other group activities*
- *greater motivation in students' approach to academics (diaries, written reports, spelling, and vocabulary) based on service learning activities*
- *sensitivity to the needs and struggles of the mentally and physically handicapped as experienced at special schools*
- *awareness of the effects of old age and facing the reality of death while visiting nursing home residents*
- *first-hand experience with people dealing with disaster when assisting victims of floods or tornadoes*
- *a new view of poverty as one student observed after delivering a*

food basket to a low income family, "I didn't know poor people were white too."

- *a chance to explore new areas together as students begin to share about their own retarded brother or dying grandparents*
- *insight gained into how others persevere. As one student wrote after working at the Special Olympics, "With these people one fall (when competing) is no reason to give up, it's a reason to keep trying."*
- *the joy of helping as recognized in the 4-H newsletter, "While we were expressing our thanks to one group of young men, one of their comments was, 'thank you for giving us the chance to know what it is like to help someone else.'"*

In conclusion, one may ask when deciding whether or not to involve groups in service planning, "What

long lasting effect will this have on today's youth?" This might best be answered with a brief anecdote that was shared by a staff member at a release luncheon to celebrate the fact that a student, named Eric, was leaving Starr to return home. She informed all those in attendance that Eric had gone to a section of nursing homes in the city of Detroit and visited several to find out whether there were any residents who had no relatives or friends to visit them. He then openly volunteered to visit those who needed a friend and in so doing, continued to recognize his value to the community at large through reaching out and touching those with less.

REFERENCE

- Brendtro, L. K., & Mitchell, M. L. Alternative schools for troubled youth: Bridging the domains of education and treatment. *Perspectives For A New Decade*. The Council For Exceptional Children, 1981.