

8-2000

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Recommended Citation

Billig, Shelley H., "The Effects of Service Learning" (2000). *Service Learning, General*. Paper 42.
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The School Administrator August 2000 | Service in an Age of

Standards

Feature

The Effects of Service Learning

Research, while limited, finds that students who help others help themselves academically and

socially by **SHELLEY H. BILLIG**

If you ask most educators about service learning, you're likely to receive one of the following responses: **a)** they don't know what you are talking about;

b) they confuse it with community service;

c) they worry it will take precious time from the basics or won't help students score high on state achievement tests; or

d) they think it is the best thing that has happened to education and their schools in quite some time.

One's opinion tends to be associated with exposure to service learning. The more you know about it and work with it, the more you are likely to know what it is and the difference between service and service learning. The more you know about the differences, the more likely you are to commit to a high-quality program. The higher the quality of the program, the more passionately you believe service learning produces important benefits for students, schools and communities.

Even believers, though, are often hard put to point to research that bolsters their view.

We should know more than we do about the impact of service learning. The National Center for Education Statistics conducted a 1999 survey that showed nearly a third of all public schools and half of all public high schools provide service learning where community service is directly linked with classroom instruction. Rarely, however, do schools engage in a systematic study of the results of service learning, and most of the available "research" in the field is not research at all, but rather the results of program evaluations.

During the last decade, however, more researchers have begun to examine the effects of service learning rigorously and, as a body of evidence, the literature reveals promising trends. What follows briefly summarizes what we know about the field of service learning and its effects on students, schools and communities.

Service Defined

One of the chief reasons that people cannot point to the impact of service learning is that it is defined in various ways. Most educators agree that service learning is a teaching strategy that links community services to classroom instruction. Most also believe that high-quality service learning includes:

- thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet authentic community needs;

- structured time that allows students to talk, think and/or write or otherwise reflect about the service experience; and
- activities that enable students to engage in planning service in collaboration with community members, specifically giving students an opportunity to make decisions and solve problems.

Quality service-learning programs also meet other criteria promoted by many leaders and researchers and expressed in the "Essential Elements of Service-Learning," a set of quality indicators developed by the National Youth Leadership Council and others. The characteristics include the provision of professional training to support program design and implementation, use of assessment to improve programs and especially support by district and school leaders.

The difference between service learning and community service is the linkage to the curriculum. The stronger the linkage (particularly with the standards connected to the curriculum and measured by the accountability test), the more the impact on academic achievement measures, according to a recent review of the K-12 research literature.

Student Effects

Research on service learning conducted during the 1990s comprises several hundred studies. A critical review can eliminate many of these from the analysis of impacts because they were studies of community service rather than service learning or they consisted of program descriptions, anecdotal evidence or discussions of best practice.

The studies that remained were primarily program evaluations with varying degrees of rigor. Some were well-designed quantitative studies with control groups and pre/post test measures. Others were well-designed qualitative research. Still others were not very well designed and lacked sophistication in the analysis.

As a whole, however, the body of evidence is compelling. Service learning has an impact on its participants in terms of personal and social development, academic achievement, development of civic responsibility and career exploration. Further, high-quality service-learning programs were much more likely to make a difference than those that did not meet quality standards.

Social Development

Studies that evaluated high-quality service-learning programs in California, Indiana and in other states showed that youth who engage in service learning showed increases in measures of personal and social responsibility, sense of educational and social competence and self-esteem or self-efficacy. Participating high school students in Florida, for example, were less likely to be referred to the office for disciplinary measures than before their participation.

A national study of high quality programs, conducted by Alan Melchior of Brandeis University, showed that participants were less likely to engage in behaviors that led to pregnancy or arrest during and after they had participated in service learning. A study of middle school students by Lydia O'Donnell and colleagues showed that students who experienced service learning and a structured health curriculum were much less likely to engage in unprotected sexual activity or violent behavior.

Other studies demonstrated that middle and elementary school students who participated in service learning were better able to trust and be trusted by others, be reliable and accept responsibility. The Indiana study revealed that high school students who participated in high quality service-learning programs developed more bonds with adults in the community and felt they had adults (in addition to parents and teachers) to whom they could turn if they needed help. Numerous studies showed service learning produced more caring for others, sensitivity to the plight of others and empathy.

Among the strongest findings in the research literature on service learning and youth development

was that students who engaged in service learning were more sensitive and showed greater acceptance of cultural diversity. The results were even stronger when the relationship involved reciprocity such that the students and community members helped each other and/or engaged in joint productive activity.

The body of evidence that links service learning to young people's personal and social development is relatively robust. A more in-depth analysis of the combined studies shows that these outcomes are maximized when students are given greater degrees of responsibility for planning, decision making, problem solving and assessing their learning.

In addition, the greater the degree of direct contact with the community (such that there is more direct communication with the elderly, youth, disabled or others being served) and the more mutuality of the relationship so that students perceive the value of the knowledge and skill gained from those who are being served, the greater the respect and caring that is developed. Outcomes are also enhanced when students have more autonomy in the service-learning tasks so they must rely on themselves and each other to solve problems.

Finally, the quality of the reflection activities in which the students engage and the active mediation of the teachers make a difference. When reflection includes elements that encourage students to make meaning of their experiences and draw connections to the roots of the community needs, students develop greater understanding and more empathy for others. When teachers facilitate discussions that help students to see deeper meaning, such as understanding and valuing cultural backgrounds, students are more apt to identify these outcomes and retain the outcomes for a longer period of time.

Academic Achievement

Many studies are being published that show the linkage between service learning and academic achievement. Among the most compelling is the California study that showed that students in more than half of the high-quality service-learning schools had a moderate to strong positive gain on student achievement tests in language arts and/or reading. The Indiana study indicated that participating students had higher standardized test scores on the state assessments in grades three and eight in English and mathematics.

Florida's study of service-learning programs also reported a gain in grade point averages, as did several studies of particular service-learning programs. A study of elementary school students in Michigan showed that students who participated in service learning scored higher on state tests that measure mathematics and reading for information, and others showed that students who participated in service learning demonstrated improved problem-solving skills, increased interest in mathematics, higher attendance and greater completion of classroom tasks.

Several studies reported that students were more motivated to learn and believed the service-learning classes were more engaging than traditional classes. The combined results of these studies appear to indicate that well-designed service learning does not take away from learning the basics but instead can contribute to higher achievement in reading, writing, mathematics, science, social studies and other academic areas.

Reviewing the body of evidence shows that academic results are maximized when there is an explicit alignment of the service-learning activities with standards and specific curriculum content. In addition, when teachers help students see the explicit link to the curriculum and when they help students discover ways to transfer academic knowledge to "real-world" experiences, the learning is also more robust and is more likely to be demonstrated on standardized tests.

Civic Responsibility

Many school leaders are concerned with students' apparent lack of information, skills or even caring about society in general and their own communities in particular. Student alienation has been linked to many negative behaviors associated with schooling. The research shows that service learning can help address this issue.

Service learning has been found to increase students' feelings of both civic and social responsibility. The California study of high-quality programs, for example, showed that participating students felt more aware of community needs, felt that they could make a difference and were committed to service later in life. Another well-designed study by James Youniss and others showed that participating high school students developed more sophisticated understandings of sociohistorical trends, were more likely to think about politics and morality and more predisposed to thinking about effecting social change. Several studies demonstrated that political efficacy or a feeling that "they can make a difference" emerged out of participation in service-learning programs.

Some researchers warn that service-learning practice needs to pay particular attention to the relationship that is developed with the community. If the relationship is such that service is considered charitable giving rather than promoting a mutually beneficial and respectful relationship, civic responsibility results are less likely to occur and service learning may actually promote greater stereotyping.

The research as a whole indicates that the results of service-learning activities directed toward the development of civic responsibility can be maximized in two ways. First, if teachers help students to connect their service with instruction to analyze deeper social issues or political trends, students tend to understand the context for the community need and the factors that lead to the need arising. If their reflection activities also are directed toward analysis of social issues and/or toward social action based on their service-learning activities, students are much more likely to be able to identify and understand issues related to citizenship.

Students also are likely to engage in activities related to citizenship such as voting, writing letters to city councils and volunteering to serve after the service-learning project has ended. Thus helping the homeless by collecting food does not produce the same outcome as researching the cause of homelessness and surveying the homeless about their conditions.

Career Exploration

Several studies demonstrated the impact of service learning on career exploration and aspirations. One study, a meta-analysis of several program evaluations, showed that students who participated in service learning reported gaining more career skills, communication skills and knowledge of more careers than nonparticipants. Another showed that students developed positive work orientation attitudes and skills. Still others show that service learning helped students acquire workplace literacy skills such as punctuality, following directions, ability to work with others and so forth.

Many of the studies that link career and service learning show that students acquire specific knowledge about the careers directly related to the service they perform. For example, if the students work in an agency that serves senior citizens, they are more likely to learn about occupations like social work. If they work with the environment, they are more likely to know about professions related to biology or environmental safety.

Career-related outcomes tend to be optimized when there is an intentional connection to workplace skills or career pathways such that students either explicitly acknowledge the connection or communicate about them during reflection.

Building Support

The body of research on service learning shows that key supports need to be in place in schools in order for the results to be sustained over time. Several studies of the impact of service learning on schools showed that service learning builds school cohesiveness, positive peer relationships among students, among teachers and between students and teachers in a school.

However, this impact only tended to occur when there was a critical mass of support for service learning (more than 20 percent of teachers) within the school, when the school and district leaders were solidly behind the effort and when there was a belief system that service learning is a beneficial teaching strategy. Studies also showed that service learning often propels a dialogue about teaching and learning in a school and especially about the best ways for students to learn how to transfer information.

The body of studies demonstrates that service learning needs many of the same supports to sustain the approach as are needed for other educational innovations. These supports include active leadership, quality professional development, a vision and action plan for how the service learning is to be implemented, alignment with standards, assessment systems that are aligned with the activities and curriculum, a person to help coordinate activities with community agencies and sufficient funding and other resources.

In addition, service learning requires special attention to factors such as student safety, transportation and accommodations for special-needs students along with special outreach to parents and the community to engage their support.

Finally, implementation studies show that service learning is associated with discomfort among some teachers, especially those who have trepidation about giving students more control and voice in the classroom. Service learning that leads to stronger outcomes is associated with student autonomy, responsibility and choice with regard to planning, participating in and evaluating service-learning activities.

Some teachers initially have concerns about this, primarily around losing control in the classroom or straying from those content areas for which they must be accountable. In many settings, this is resolved by setting strong parameters for students, having them become stewards of curriculum alignment and having teachers serve as active mediators of reflection activities.

Next Steps

As more research is conducted, school leaders can learn more about the factors within service learning that produce the kind of outcomes that are desired. In particular, research is needed to make a stronger case for service learning as an integral teaching and learning strategy to meet particular challenging state content standards and to demonstrate students' mastery on accountability measures. More research is also needed to help leaders understand the dynamics that make service learning effective as a pedagogy and the types of students who respond best.

While additional research is necessary, the results of the current research are promising. Students who help others do demonstrate they are also helping themselves.

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