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June R. Chapin

The College of Notre Dame, Belmont, California

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Missing Pieces in the Service Learning Puzzle

by June R. Chapin



Paying due attention to student, family, and school characteristics in planning service learning projects for students seems to be a logical—perhaps neglected—step to increase civic responsibility.

June R. Chapin, Ed.D., is professor of education at The College of Notre Dame, Belmont, California.

The increasing popularity in the schools for sponsoring service learning or community service reflects the grave concern that more has to be done to teach youth to participate in a democratic society. The declining voting turnout and the reported low involvement of adults in community groups are often cited as a need for the schools to counter the current apathy and cynicism about government and political leaders. Whether there really is a decline in civic involvement is open to question but the national debate on promoting civic education and social responsibility is reflected in state and local communities requiring students' participation in community service.¹

Research Base of Service Learning

What does research show about the effectiveness of service learning or community service, and especially the claim that it promotes civic development? Unfortunately, advocates of service learning or community service do not have an adequate research base to justify service learning. Reviews of research findings have mostly looked at political efficacy, the feeling you can influence what the government does and that the government responds adequately. The results have been mixed and inconsistent partly since it has been a difficult field for researchers for the following reasons.²

Definition Problems. The meaning and purpose of service learning and community service plague research in this field. *Service learning* has been defined as integration of community service with academic coursework. Academic learning focuses on acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for good citizenship. But how much integration into the curriculum is necessary to fit this definition of service learning? According to Wade and Saxe, a reflective, thoughtful seminar and enough time spent in the service activity are critical. Furthermore, they state that service learning should focus on a social action or reformist per-

spective.³ On the other hand, the Corporation for National Service defines service learning as "provides structured time for a student to think, talk, or write about what the student did and saw during the actual service activity." Building on this definition, Niemi and Chapman state that service learning occurs when a student gives an oral report to the class, writes a report, or receives a grade or a portion of a grade for the activity.⁴

Community service is a broader term than service learning and is defined by Kahne and Westheimer as altruism, charity, or giving back to the local community.⁵ The purpose is to help those in need. Sometimes it is called volunteer service. Such volunteer community service has a long history, especially in Catholic and independent high schools. Focusing on helping others, community service is not necessarily tied into what is going on in a particular school course or topic. Unlike service learning, it does not have a social reconstruction focus.

In practice, the two terms—service learning and community service—are used interchangeably and the distinction in actual practice may not be clear from one classroom to another. However, service learning and community service differ in the purpose or objective of the community experience. The goal of community service is social responsibility or personal or character development. Increasing civic skills is the goal in service learning. But what constitutes civic skills? Five factors are outlined by Niemi and Chapman: levels of political knowledge, attention to politics, political participatory skills, degrees of political efficacy, and tolerance of diversity.⁶ The 1994 Center for Civic Education's national civic standards listed content standards (knowledge), intellectual, and participatory skills. A more common-sense definition may define the civic skills as the willingness of adults to vote and to participate in community organizations.

How then is the effectiveness of service learning or community service offered by the schools to be evaluated? What single or combination of criteria should be used? By students' academic achievement in civics and government classes? Political efficacy? Or future civic participation? Personal growth or character? You can see the problems of what standards or criteria should be used.

Diversity of Experiences. A wide range of activities exists under the names of service learning or community service. Schools have service projects on topics such as improving literacy (often tutoring), working with senior citizens, helping to improve the environment, fighting crime and drug abuse, and working on health projects. The quality of community service probably

varies enormously from one school setting to another. In addition, the amount of time for community service can span from a one-shot activity such as cleaning the local park to a weekly commitment of time. Even the same activity, such as tutoring, may differ from session to session depending on the variables of time, the individuals involved, the student's own subjective evaluation of the experience, and their own personality and characteristics. There is probably more commonality on what goes on in a math or science class than what is happening in the schools in a unit called service learning. This may be a plus in terms of meeting both the

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needs of the students and the community but makes the evaluation procedure much more difficult.

Lack of Attention to Key Characteristics

Service learning and community service may occur in any grade level and in any subject area, but most often it is found in the social studies classroom, especially in the eleventh and twelfth grades. Many educational researchers have been reluctant or unable to examine the following four characteristics: (1) individual, such as race/ethnic groups, gender, grade point average, and academic program; (2) family, including education and the level of participation of parents in the community; (3) type of school (public, private), amount of activities such as student government, amount of help given to arrange community services, etc.; and (4) community characteristics with the percentage of owner-occupied dwellings, and poverty rates. However, research in the 1990s, especially using data from large government surveys, has shown the importance of the family and the community in influencing civic participation of students.⁷ Furthermore, while adults from all walks of life are involved in community service, those from higher income sectors and those with more years of education are more apt to participate in community service.

Most of the journal articles on service learning are glowing reports of what happened in a given school with little description of the students or the community in which the service took place.⁸ Or there are reviews on what many different schools have done on

one particular area such as hunger, ignoring student, family, and school characteristics. Neglecting to consider these key characteristics, however, may not increase the probabilities of success for teachers in implementing service learning. Successful implementation may require a much more careful consideration of these key characteristics.

Findings from Large Research Projects

Neglected and not cited in the research on service learning have been the federal government's studies: NELS: 88 and NHES: 96. NELS: 88 (National Longitudinal Study of 1988) is the latest of the three national longitudinal surveys (1972, 1980, 1988) conducted by the U. S. Department of Education. NELS: 88 was designed to measure instructional practices and cognitive outcomes in four core subject areas: reading, mathematics, science, and history/citizenship/geography to approximately 24,600 eighth-grade students in spring 1988. In addition, extensive student, parent, teacher, and school administrator questionnaires were administered. The first follow-up of questionnaires and tests of these students was conducted in the tenth grade in spring 1990, when most were sophomores with a second follow-up at twelfth grade in spring 1992 when most were seniors. The first follow-up after the 1988 cohort had left high schools was in 1994.

One focus for my research was the responses of seniors in 1992 about what community volunteer work students had done during the past two years. As seen

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in Table 1, forty-four percent of the 1992 high school seniors reported having participated in community work. Young women participated more than young men and Asians and whites more than blacks and Hispanics. Private school students participated substantially more than public school students. Higher community service participation was related to higher socioeconomic status, higher educational levels of parents, higher test proficiency, being in a college preparatory program, being in the highest quarter of one's class, and not being in a school that had a high proportion of subsidized

lunches. The only unexpected finding was that the urban schools had higher participation in community service than suburban schools.

In 1992, 85.3 percent of these seniors reporting community work said it was strictly volunteer and only 14.7 percent reported that it was not. This means that at this time, most of the service was not related to service learning but had more of the characteristics of

Table 1
Percent of 16,114 High School Seniors in 1992 Reporting Participation in Community Work During Past Two Years

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|---------|----------------------------|---------|
| TOTAL PARTICIPATION | | 44.0% | |
| GENDER | | HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAM | |
| Male | 38.5*** | General | 36.4*** |
| Female | 49.6*** | CollegePrep | 5.9*** |
| | | Vocational | 29.5*** |
| RACE/ETHNICITY | | CLASS RANK | |
| Asian | 48.1*** | Highest quarter | 1.3*** |
| Hispanic | 39.1*** | Third Quarter | 5.7*** |
| Black | 36.0*** | Second Quarter | 5.6*** |
| White | 46.1*** | Lowest Quarter | 8.7*** |
| SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS | | SCHOOL URBANICITY | |
| Low | 30.0*** | Urban | 49.0*** |
| Middle | 42.6*** | Suburban | 43.6 |
| High | 60.9*** | Rural | 40.3*** |
| PARENTS' EDUCATION | | TYPE OF SCHOOL | |
| Less than High School | 30.9*** | Public | 42.0*** |
| High School Grad./GED | 34.3*** | Catholic | 66.7*** |
| Some College Work | 43.9 | NAIS Private | 73.3*** |
| Completed College | 52.9*** | Other | 51.2*** |
| Graduate Degree | 60.4*** | | |
| TESTED PROFICIENCY | | SUBSIDIZED LUNCH | |
| Below basic in at | | 10% or less | 48.8*** |
| least one area | 26.9*** | 11%-49% | 41.0*** |
| At least basic in | | 50% or more | 38.0*** |
| all areas | 48.7*** | | |

***p<001. Compared to expected percentage of 44%.

Standards errors are all less than 3.0 with two exceptions: Type of school, NAIS Private is 4.45 and Other Private is 4.92. Source: U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988; Second Follow-Up, 1992.

community service. Court-ordered community work was 3.1 percent with a significant difference of males reporting 6 percent of court-ordered community work compared to only 1 percent of the females.

Table 2
**Percent of Seniors Participation in Different Types
 of Community Organizations**

| Type | Total | Male | Female |
|---|-------|---------|---------|
| Church or Church-related Groups (not including worship services) | 49.4 | 44.9*** | 51.1*** |
| Youth Group (coaching Little League or helping out with scouts) | 24.8 | 32.3*** | 19.3*** |
| Community Group (community centers, neighborhood improvement or social-action associations or groups) | 24.6 | 21.0*** | 27.2*** |
| Education (education organizations) | 21.4 | 16.5*** | 25.1*** |
| Hospital (organized volunteer group in a hospital or nursing home) | 19.7 | 12.9*** | 24.8*** |
| Environmental Group (a conservation, recycling, or environmental group such as the Sierra Club or the Nature Conservancy) | 13.5 | 12.2* | 14.5* |
| Service Group (service organizations, such as Big Brother or Sister) | 12.2 | 10.2*** | 13.7** |
| Political Group (political clubs or organizations) | 9.6 | 8.5* | 10.5* |

*p<.05 Binomial tests compared to figures in Total; **p<.01;
 ***p<.001. Adopted from paper by June R. Chapin entitled "High
 School Seniors Reported Participation in Student Government and
 Volunteer Work: Data from the National Longitudinal Study of 1988"
 given at the National Council of the Social Studies, Cincinnati, Ohio,
 1997.

These seniors then responded by identifying the type of community service they chose, with the most popular being church-related groups and the least popular being political groups (Table 2). Young women participated more in all categories except youth group activities. Ethnic/racial differences also were noted. Black women participated more in political groups than any other group and Hispanic men were the least likely to participate in church groups. White men participated the most in youth groups while Asian

women participated highly in hospital groups. White women participated the most in environmental groups. Teachers ideally should be aware of the popular community service activities that their particular students would like. Thus, the national data of NELS: 88 can be valuable to teachers in the field.

The second relevant government survey, National Household Education Survey of 1996 (NHES: 96), Youth Civic Involvement component, is a more recent national survey of community service. When appropriately weighted, this sample is nationally representative of all civilian, noninstitutionalized persons and can be generalized to the entire student population of the United States. In NHES: 96, 8,043 students in grades six through twelve were asked in telephone interviews from January 1996 to April 1996 about their participation in community service activities. This interview was attempted after an interview with his or her parent/guardian had been completed. The completion rate for youth in grades six through twelve was 76 percent. About 93.3 percent of all students in grades one through twelve live in households with telephones. However, estimation procedures were used to help reduce the bias associated with youth who do not live in telephone households.⁹

About half (49 percent) of students in grades six through twelve reported they participated in a community service activity in the 1995-96 school year. Note that this was a much higher participation rate than NELS:88 seniors and the time period included only a year instead of the two years of NELS:88. This seems to indicate that there was truly an increased involvement in community service nationally supporting the general perception of increase of community service in recent years. Of this half of students, those who participated in community service were split fairly evenly between those who said they participated once or twice (23 percent) and those who participated more regularly (26 percent).

Participation in community service paralleled the results of NELS: 88 in most cases. Using individual characteristics, higher grades correlated with increased participation, with 60 percent of mostly "A" students participating compared to only 30 percent of mostly "D" and "F" students. Community participation was higher for the following: females (53 percent) compared to males (45 percent); students for whom English was the language they spoke at home; and eleventh and twelfth graders. Students who participated in other activities were more likely to participate in community service. Students who attended private schools,

especially church-related schools, were also more likely to have done community service. White students were more likely to participate than students from other racial or ethnic groups. With regard to family characteristics, students were more likely to participate if an adult in the household participated in community service and if the highest degree held by a parent was a college degree or higher.

Eighty-six percent of all students in NHES: 96 who participated in community service said that they were

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in schools that encouraged community service, either through requiring participation (18 percent) or by arranging or offering community service. Only two percent of students were in schools that required community service without also arranging it. Note that compared to NELS: 88 data there was only a slight increase from around 15 percent to 18 percent of students who reported that the school required community service. It appears that the schools are encouraging community service by arranging it but that the vast majority of schools do not require community service.

About half of the students (56 percent) who participated in community service reported that their schools in some way used service-learning methods. In this group nearly half (45 percent) said they had a *chance* to talk about their service experience in class or in a group session with other students. About one-fourth (23 percent) said their service activity contributed to a class grade, and 17 percent said that they were required to write about their service activity in a journal or essay. Only 7 percent said that the service activity was incorporated in all three ways. If students were in schools that both required and arranged community service, their community service was more likely to be incorporated into the curriculum.

Using data from NHES: 1996, Niemi and Chapman looked at the relationship between ninth through twelfth grade students' participation in community service and their civic development. They concluded that community service activity was associated with several key dimensions of civic development: greater

political knowledge, more frequent conversation with parents about the news, greater perceived participation skills, and a higher sense of internal political efficacy. But community service in general did not seem to promote several other factors associated with good citizenship, such as tolerance of diversity. Niemi and Chapman suggested that the *type* of community service may be a factor in ascribing benefits or lack of benefits of community service toward civic development.¹⁰

Niemi and Chapman's results also pointed out the importance of the *amount of time* given to community service by the student. Those who had performed thirty-five or more hours of work had the most positive relationships between service and civic development. This may mean that smaller amounts of service are of little consequence to civic development. One-shot experiences in the community may not have much impact. Hours spent appears to have more effect than whether or not students had their service experiences integrated into the classroom experience. Interesting enough, service learning, incorporated into the curriculum by the students' speaking about it, writing about the experience, or having it count for grading purposes, did *not* noticeably improve students' civic development scores. Based on this finding, it is difficult for teachers to know how best to incorporate service learning into their classrooms.

Summary

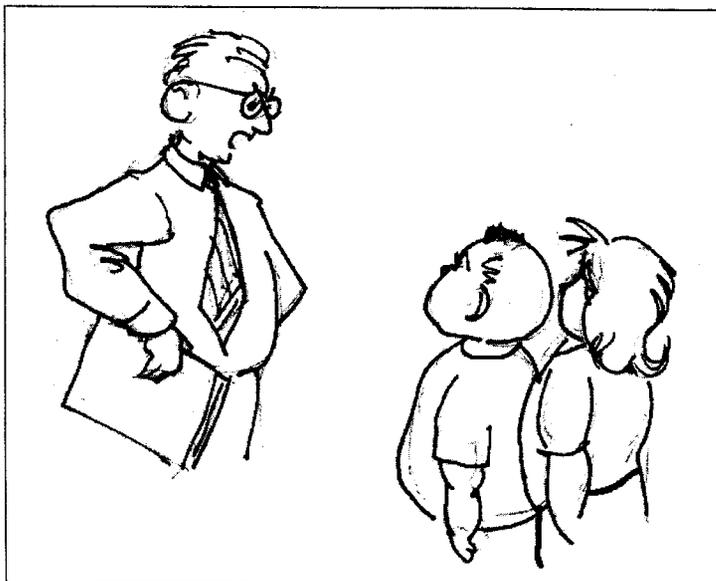
What practices derived from the research look promising for improving service or community learning? Sustained community involvement seems to be associated with the most improvement in civic development. This seems to make sense—the more hours spent may make a difference. However, the requirement of a substantial number of hours does not seem prevalent in most schools, partly because too many hours of community service may appear to both students and their parents as unpaid peon labor.

Secondly, teachers should carefully consider the characteristics of the students, their families, and their community when they plan community or service learning. This does not mean faulting the family or community but simply realizing that not all students are ready to participate in this type of service. Being sensitive to the most popular community service choices for students is important and may prove more successful all around. It also appears that the type or choice of service may make differences in civic development.

Lastly, we should be careful not to oversell what service learning and community service can do. The

calls for community and service learning reflect worthy attempts to increase *civic participation*. However, to increase civic skills of students may require more substantial hours and a more careful consideration of what particular community service activity is both liked by students and has potential to increase civic participation skills. **eh**

1. E. Ladd, *Silent Revolution: The Reinvention of Civic America* (New York: Free Press, 1998).
2. R.C. Wade and D.W. Saxe, "Community Service-Learning in the Social Studies: Historical Roots, Empirical Evidence, Critical Issues," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 24, no. 4 (1996): 331-59.
3. Ibid.
4. R. Niemi and C. Chapman, *The Civic Development of 9th Through 12th Grade Students in the United States: 1996* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 1999-31, 1998).
5. J. Kahne and J. Westheimer, "In the Service of What? The Politics of Service Learning," *Phi Delta Kappan* 77, no. 9 (1996): 592-99.
6. Niemi and Chapman, *Civic Development*, iii.
7. See especially P. Green, B. Dugoni, S. Ingels, and E. Camburn, *A Profile of the American High School Senior in 1992* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 95-384, 1995); and M. Nolin, B. Chaney, and C. Chapman, *Student Participation in Community Service Activity* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 97-331, 1997).



"Well, to get a passing grade in my democracy class, I require you to volunteer!"

8. W. Mittlefehdt, "Proactive Citizenship and Service Learning at Anoka High School," *The Social Studies* 88, no. 5 (1997): 203-09.
9. Nolin, Chaney, and Chapman, *Student Participation*, section on Survey Methodology and Data Reliability, 16-26.
10. Niemi and Chapman, *Civic Development*, 45-54.