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## A Study of the Effects of Participation in the Helper Model of Service Learning in Early Adolescence

Center for Advanced Study in Education (CASE)

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*A study of*  
**THE EFFECTS OF PARTICIPATION IN  
THE HELPER MODEL OF SERVICE LEARNING  
IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE**

**Funding for this work was provided by the William T. Grant Foundation.**

The Service Learning Impact Study is a multifaceted multi-year study funded by the William T. Grant Foundation to examine the impact of the Helper Model of service learning. This research is exploring whether and how participation by middle school students contributes to the development of academic or school-related skills, enhances psychosocial abilities, and leads to the acquisition of skills for the school to work transition.

The goals of this project are to:

- examine the impact of participating during early adolescence in service learning (Helper Program)
- identify how impact is related to program characteristics and the types of service students perform
- develop a preliminary framework and exploratory hypotheses of the relationship between reflection and the service learning experience

**Background:** Theoretical writings, selective research, and anecdotal data from teachers, students, and program leaders have reinforced the notion that service learning can have a positive impact. Many have noted that there is a need to identify characteristics of the service experience which are related to positive outcomes. However, there have been few rigorous research studies and their findings have not been conclusive. Furthermore, rarely have studies focused on early adolescence.

**Participants:** The sample includes over 1500 students from six middle schools with exemplary Service Learning Programs based on the Helper Model. At each school service learning is a requirement for all students within a given grade (primarily grade 8). The two urban, two urban fringe and two suburban schools include an ethnically and economically mixed student population. Each program meets the essential features of the Helper Model, including weekly reflection and a minimum 10 week service experience. Comparison data were collected from over 500 students not involved in service learning.

**Methodology and Data Analyses:** During 1995-96 and 1996-97 data were collected from service learning and comparison students, teachers, program leaders and school administrators, using surveys, interviews and observations. The large scale data collection phase included the collection of pre and post surveys (both quantitative and qualitative data) achievement data and attendance data from the entire sample of 1200 service learning and 500 non-service students. The focused data collection included observations, interviews and the collection of student essays at two of the schools. During 1997-98 more focused observations of reflection were completed. In addition, a brief survey was administered pre and post to examine specific questions. The data analyses rely upon a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The impact of service learning on students and differences in impact according to program characteristics is investigated by comparing student responses over time, contrasting service learning students with comparison students, and examining differences across sites and programs.

**Preliminary Results:** Students reported that they found service learning provided more learning opportunities than school and they felt more positive affect toward service learning than school. Students reported they learned the most about interpersonal relationships and dealing with others. There was limited awareness of academic learning related to the service experience. Student impact appears to be mediated by differences across schools, programs, sites, teachers, reflection sessions and the year the data were collected. Key elements are school and administrative support, engagement of the site, teacher buy-in, and reflection sessions linked to the site experiences. Changes over time in programs due to new staff, district priorities, student population and training opportunities had a great impact on the study results within years.

**Consultation Groups:** The project has three consultation groups: An Advisory Board consisting of experts in the areas of education, early adolescence, evaluation and applied educational research; A Research Planning and Liaison Group including teachers and program representatives from each participating program; and a Student Advisory Group including student representatives from each participating school.

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