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**Increasing Service-Learning's Impact on
Middle School Students***

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Increasing Service-Learning's Impact on Middle School Students

The use of service-learning in middle and high schools has expanded in the 1990s (Scales & Koppelman 1997), but the gap between what is being done in schools and what research tells us about the impact of service-learning is uncomfortably large. Service-learning advocates are convinced of its profound impact on young people, both personally and socially. The quantitative research consistently shows positive effects, but the quality of the research has not been consistently high, the effects observed vary from study to study, and positive academic effects are the least commonly documented. The scarcity of data on academic impact may be because relatively few programs have established academic impact as an important goal (Scales & Blyth 1997). Search Institute researchers, in partnership with the National Youth Leadership Council, conducted a national search to identify middle school service-learning programs in order to take a closer look at both the effects of service-learning and the reasons for those effects. We selected three schools in Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Missouri to participate in the study during the 1996-1997 school year (we had planned to follow students into the 1997-1998 school year, but the followup data were not useful because schools were unable to maintain the control groups).

The details of our study are reported elsewhere (Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier 1998). The results are both promising and sobering, and suggest several important lessons for how to increase the effectiveness of service-learning programs.

Description of the Schools' Service-Learning Programs

In addition to data collected from students, we visited each school and conducted teacher interviews and surveys, and each of the three school's service-learning coordinators to prepare a narrative description of those programs. Figure 1 provides a description of each school's service-learning offerings during the 1996-1997 school year.

According to the 18 service-learning teachers in those three schools, students represented a broad mix of high achieving, at risk, and average students. Eight of the 18 teachers said their service-learning class had existed for two years or less, were not graded, and gave academic credit. Seventy-five percent of the teachers said their service-learning activities were part of a required course. A majority of the teachers (61%) said service both in and outside of school grounds was involved. Young adolescents themselves were involved in choosing the service activities in more than 80% of the cases, either alone, in groups, or with their teachers. Group activity was involved in all service-learning classes, with 61% of the teachers saying service was conducted primarily in groups of young people, and the remainder doing a combination of individual and group service activities. As Figure 1 shows, students in these schools did a broad mix of activities, with direct human service and school service most common, followed by environmental activities and career exploration.

What We Found

In studying more than 1,000 6th through 8th graders, we found the following key results. Service-learning students, compared to control students:

1. maintained their concern for other's social welfare; and
2. decreased only slightly how often they talked with parents about school.

In contrast, control group students decreased in their concern for others, and even more dramatically, in their parents' involvement with school, as measured by frequency of talking with parents about school. There were no other significant differences between service-learning and control groups.

However, when we looked at key features of the service-learning programs, such as how many hours students spent in them, how common students felt reflection about their service experiences was, and whether students felt service-learning made them more interested in their other classes, we found more provocative results on academic variables. Students who had *more than 31 hours* of service-learning, and *a lot of reflection*, and who thought service-learning had *motivated them to be more interested* in their other classes, compared to students without those experiences:

- * significantly improved in their sense of duty to help others;
- * significantly increased their sense that they could make a difference when helping others;
- * maintained their sense that school provided developmental opportunities such as decision making and recognition from adults (while other students declined in these perceptions);
- * declined less than other students in their commitment to classwork; and
- * improved somewhat in their pursuit of getting good grades.

Implications for Service-Learning Programs

Why didn't we observe greater impact on the measures of academic success when we simply compared all service-learning students with all control group students? We did, after all, go to considerable lengths to identify and select middle schools with seemingly excellent service-learning programs. There appear to be several explanations for why we didn't find even more positive results. Those explanations lead to a number of recommendations for middle schools to follow in order to increase the possible academic impact of service-learning.

Influence of the wider school environment

Across the school year, both service-learning and control students lost more ground on most variables than they gained. They ended the year less engaged, less committed to schoolwork, less inclined to take personal responsibility for their intellectual achievement, and perceived fewer developmental opportunities in school than they did just a few weeks into the start of the school year. Although their conduct was good and stayed that way as the year went on, their mean GPAs went down. These trends suggest a broader inability of these middle schools' environments to capture the imagination and commitment of students in general. Even a well-conceived and operated service-learning program would be hard-pressed to show positive results under those conditions. In such circumstances, the effect of service-learning on academic variables is likely to be both minimal and indirect, such as through the maintained parent involvement observed in this study.

Limited/variable support for service-learning

In two of our schools, there also were teacher changes at the last minute, which resulted in having some less committed teachers on one service-learning team, and a late start in the fall for another team. One of the new teachers on that 8th grade team was not only doing service-learning for the first time, but also had never even taught middle school before. The three principals --two of whom had suddenly been replaced at the start of the

school year-- also had varying degrees of enthusiasm and support for the service-learning programs. Among the least enthusiastic was one who was in her first year ever as a principal, and among her first decisions was to eliminate the service-learning coordinator's position.

Influence of local and state politics

In two schools, there was a great deal of pressure on the teachers and principals to produce higher test scores in their schools. Teachers reported a great deal of frustration at how those pressures may have interfered with the attention given service-learning. At the Kentucky school, for example, the state required a considerable amount of documentation about the school's efforts to raise scores, and teachers found it "overwhelming."

Students' previous experience with service-learning

Three out of four of the students we studied had participated in service-learning with reflection before the 1996-1997 school year, either in or outside of school. Those students did better than others, whether in the service-learning or control group, on all dependent variables on the pre-test, and at levels of significance typically far greater than any of the significant differences between service-learning and control students found for the 1996-1997 school year. Perhaps a positive cumulative effect of service-learning is at work here. It may be difficult to tell what one year's experience added to those students, because the high proportion of the full sample who previously had service-learning meant that a solid percentage of control students (at least 25%) had previously had service-learning too.

Limited teacher preparation generally, and for service-learning in particular

Our three schools had service-learning teachers with mixed levels of experience and interest in service-learning. More than 40% had spent 10 years or more as a middle grades teacher, but for nearly 25%, this was their first year as a middle grades teacher. Nearly two-thirds had not gone through a special middle-grades preparation program as either an undergraduate or graduate student. Moreover, the primary training in service-learning was just a one-day workshop at some time within the last three years. Specially-prepared middle school teachers feel better able to work with young adolescents more generally, and with community resources such as those where students often do their community service (Scales 1992; Scales & McKewin 1994), but nearly two-thirds of all the teachers in this study had not been specially prepared for middle school teaching. Given that widespread lack of special preparation, it is not surprising that service-learning teachers were no more engaged as teachers and felt no more capable than their control group counterparts.

Teacher goals for service-learning

Among the service-learning teachers, and similar to what has been found in previous studies of service-learning, increasing academic achievement was the least important of six possible goals for service-learning, while increasing students' altruism was the most important goal. Just half thought increasing academic performance was an important goal, but 100% thought increasing altruism was important. If a measure of success is the fit between teachers' goals and students' outcomes, then these teachers were indeed successful in their service-learning practice, since a measure of altruism, service-learning students' sense of duty to help others, did increase significantly over the year among students who participated in a lot of reflection, and another measure, concern for others, held steady for service-learning students while control group students' concern for others decreased.

Moreover, half of all the teachers, both service-learning and control teachers, said that intellectual development was only one of their school's important priorities, not the primary one. For those teachers, promoting intellectual development was just an equal priority with promoting students' social/emotional, physical, and creative development. Given that we were studying middle school students, that sense of balance is more developmentally appropriate and in sync with recommended practices for effective middle schools (NMSA 1997), and yet, it could dilute the emphasis on the academic impact of practices such as service-learning.

Features of the service-learning program

depth of exposure/intensity

The service projects in our study often were relatively brief; 43% of the service-learning teachers said service-learning lasted for a few hours a month for just two months; Students agreed: Nearly half of the service-learning students (46%) said they spent 10 hours or less total time on service-learning. This is consistent with findings from both Blyth, Saito, and Berkas (1997) and Melchior and Orr (1995) that middle school service-learning programs tend to be briefer than high school programs, typically lasting just a few weeks. Even students who spend more than 30 hours on service-learning activities spend just 2 1/2 percent of their annual school time so occupied; it is difficult to imagine how that small percentage exposure could override the impact of the rest of their school experience, and harder still to imagine that spending less than that amount could have any meaningful impact on large numbers of youth. Our more average programs contrast with what Melchior (1997) found in studying more intensive Learn and Serve programs: The middle school students in that study spent an average of *more than 50 hours* in their service-learning programs, and, not surprisingly, Melchior reported more numerous positive effects on school engagement and grades.

nature of service-learning activities

Although students engaged in a variety of service activities, teachers in two of the three schools felt the service activities during 1996-1997 were probably not as comprehensive, well-planned, or truly connected to the wider community as in previous years. At the Missouri school, for example, the previous two years' service activity involved fixing and repainting storm drains around the town, compared with this year's caring for the aviary and aquarium in the school. The scope and appeal of the storm drain project were considered much greater than the scope and appeal of the in-school project.

degree of integration across the curriculum

One filter for selecting schools had been that service-learning was supposed to be integrated across the curriculum, and all three appeared to satisfy this criterion on paper and on an initial site visit. However, only the Massachusetts school's 7th graders had service-learning truly integrated across four of the subjects often considered the core curriculum (Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, and Math). Thus, for most of the service-learning students in this study, service-learning was something that happened relatively briefly in a couple of classes, but was not a pervasive feature of the school as a learning environment. The relative lack of integration may be a result of the newness of those programs: About half of the service learning teachers said their service-learning classes had existed for two years or less.

In addition, service-learning was supposed to be a required part of classes in our three schools, but for about half the students, the service experiences were either elective or ungraded. Students might reasonably have wondered how seriously the adults in the school took service-learning. In fact, for both service-learning and control groups, pursuit of mastery goals, a desirable outcome associated with working harder and achieving more (Wentzel 1989), declined over the school year, while the importance attached to evaluation goals held steady--grades were more important to both groups of students than learning for its own sake, from the beginning of the school year to the end. Given those motivations for learning, ungraded service-learning may not have been considered very important. The only exceptions to these trends were that pursuit of learning for its own sake was maintained rather than declining among those service-learning students who thought that service-learning had made them more interested in their other classes.

degree of preparation and reflection activities

Just 31% of the service-learning students said they spent "a lot" of time reading, writing, or discussing as preparation for their service, and only 14% said they spent "a lot" of reflection time reading, writing, or talking about their experiences afterwards. One-third had only a little or no preparation time, and 47% had only a little or no reflection time. Sufficient reflection time has consistently been shown to be an important contributor to the positive effects of service-learning (Blyth, Saito, & Berkas 1997; Conrad & Hedin 1981), so our results should not be surprising in light of such low levels.

Our results suggest that, to have even greater significant impact on academic attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes, service-learning programs should:

1. Provide more than 30 hours of service and connected learning activities, with a lot of preparation and reflection;
2. Be staffed with teachers who have formal training in service-learning beyond a one-day workshop every three years, and who are specially trained to teach the ages they teach;
3. Be truly integrated in all subjects rather than piecemeal across the curriculum. That practice would take advantage of the finding that for a sizable proportion of students -- 26% of the service-learning students in this study -- service-learning made them more interested in their other classes. This is a solid contribution to student motivation on which practitioners could explicitly build;
4. Explicitly name academic achievement as a hoped-for outcome of student participation in service-learning; it must be recognized, however, that an over-emphasis on service-learning's academic impact may not be developmentally appropriate at the middle school level--equally important is the impact on young adolescents' social, emotional, physical, moral, and creative development; and
5. Recognizing the possible strong impact that service-learning may have in maintaining parent involvement, explicitly incorporate more intentional student-parent activities into the service-learning program that build upon and extend that positive impact

(e.g., using as field sites the places where students' parents work, asking parents to present about their work as part of the preparation for service-learning, inviting parents to special presentations where their sons and daughters discuss their service-learning experiences, etc.).

Conclusion

Given the many possible reasons discussed above for a lack of impact, including teachers' limited emphasis on academic achievement as a goal for service-learning and the limited exposure young people had to either preparation for service or reflection about it afterwards, it should be considered remarkable that we found service-learning to be associated with maintaining their level of concern for others, as well as with significantly limiting what otherwise was a considerable decline in parental involvement with schooling experienced by control group students. A vast literature documents the contribution that the assets of caring for others and parental involvement in schooling make to academic success and other positive outcomes (Scales & Leffert, 1999).

In addition, those students who had the most hours of service-learning and reflection, and those for whom service-learning was a significant motivator, were significantly better on numerous social responsibility and academic success variables than students with less exposure, reflection, and motivation attributed to service-learning. The lesson of our study is that quality does count, but so does quantity. For students who did fewer than 31 hours of service-learning, and did only "some" reflection about it, those impressive results were not observed.

Perhaps just as remarkable, given that the service-learning classes we studied were probably representative of typical programs across the country, 26% of service-learning students said service-learning made them *more interested* in their other classes, a significant motivational impact. When studies show that 40% to 50% of students are bored with school (Scales 1996), a class that can increase self-reported interest in other classes is a potentially powerful tool for increasing overall engagement, motivation, and achievement.

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FIGURE 1

Description of Service-Learning Programs

School	Types of Projects	Duration	Classes
Kentucky 6th	buddies at: nursing home, daycare for homeless shelter children, kindergarten class, preschool class	5 hrs/month for school year	language arts; science
Kentucky 7th	buddies at: senior center, preschool, kindergarten class; creating an outdoor classroom	5 hrs/month for school year	language arts
Kentucky 8th	interdisciplinary study of the Louisville community	spring	science; social studies
Massachusetts 7th	develop and deliver lesson on UNICEF for 5th graders	2 weeks in the fall	language arts; social studies; science; math
	work on nature trail	throughout spring	same
Massachusetts 8th	tape oral histories of retired tool industry employees for local heritage museum	about 1 mo.	social studies; language arts
	celebrate women's history month by quilting lap robes/pillows to give to elderly or to abused children	about 1 mo.	social studies; math
Missouri 6th	build furniture for, and care for aviary and aquarium in the student center	2 hrs/week in fall	language arts; math; science