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## Is service learning a good idea? Data from the National Longitudinal Study of 1988.

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Explore

**Is service learning a good idea? Data from the National Longitudinal Study of 1988.** (includes related article on books on service learning) *June R. Chapin.*

**Abstract:** Service learning is an integral part of social studies that aims to instill social responsibility among students. According to the National Longitudinal Study of 1988, a significant percentage of high school students participated in community work during the previous two years and that this involvement in community service was greatest in church or church-related groups. However, the survey showed that students favor diversity in their choice of community work and that social action is not their top priority. Furthermore, there is confusion about the difference between service and community learning.

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The September/October 1997 issue *The Social Studies* contained five excellent and stimulating articles and a book review focused on service learning (Wade 1997a; Mittlefehldt 1997; Constitutional Rights Foundation 1997; Alliance for Service-Learning 1997; Allen 1997; Oswald 1997). That section illustrates the growing interest that social studies educators have in service learning, although interest in service learning is not limited to social studies teachers. Teachers and administrators, however, must be more aware of the distinctions between service learning and community service. Numerous prominent individuals, such as President Bill Clinton and former presidents George Bush and Jimmy Carter, advocate that all Americans, including students, do community or volunteer service. Foundations, school administrators, elected school board members, and government officials encourage young people to do community service, often justified for its contribution to civic education and cited as an authentic and rich learning experience. That endeavor is not the same as recommending service learning.

In this article, I present data from the National Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88) to indicate the widespread participation of high school seniors in community service without being required by their schools to do so. I contend that this information suggests that teachers should build upon the interest in community service and improve it. I offer some hints to help make both community and service learning more effective learning experiences.

### Service Learning

The terms "community service" or "service learning" are often used interchangeably. However, distinguishing between the two is important. Service learning is defined as integration of community service with academic coursework. In other words, it is a thoughtfully organized community service experience that enhances what teachers have chosen as the objectives and curriculum in their classrooms. A reflective, thoughtful seminar and enough time spent in

service activity are critical (Wade 1995; Wade 1997; Wade and Saxe 1996). Furthermore, according to Wade and Saxe, service learning should be focused with a social action perspective. Students should question the status quo and revitalize our democratic society, while at the same time responding compassionately to those presently in need. Change, caring, social reconstruction, and a transformative experience are characteristics of service learning goals, whereas charity, giving civic duty, and additive experience characterize community service (Kahne and Westheimer 1996). One could say that service learning has a more liberal orientation and that community service is more traditional and more politically moderate.

If we judge by the literature on the subject, service learning has increased within the last seven years. How widespread it is is not known, but the literature suggests that the practice is not as common as community service. The organizational problems inherent in collaborative activities probably reduce the number of teachers willing to use service learning. Few coordinators for service learning programs are available in the schools, and the work often falls to classroom teachers. Making the contacts with the community agencies (the nonprofits, the community-based organizations, the government agencies) and supervising the field experiences, even superficially take more time commitment than many busy classroom teachers can afford. Even if only one agency is involved in setting up work for thirty or so students, and typically that is not the case, time is needed for communication, negotiation, and mutual respect between the school and the agency.

Teachers must continuously keep school administrators, parents, and members of the community informed, making the community agencies full partners in the project. They often publish newsletters about projects as a way to improve communication among those involved in service learning. Presently, because of the average high school's inflexible time schedule, teachers find it difficult to obtain released time for students involved in service learning. Restructuring of the high school schedule may be a prerequisite for even moderate involvement of students in service learning. In contrast, most students make their own arrangements to fulfill their community service requirement.

Although the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and the National Service Trust Act of 1993 have encouraged interest by giving funding to states for school-based service learning, most classroom teachers have not been professionally trained to incorporate community service into their curriculum. Only a few organizations, such as the Social Science Education Consortium (SSEC) and centers funded by the federal government, have conducted training for those involved in school-based community service projects, and those reach a very limited audience.

### Community Service

Much more commonly found and encouraged by most teachers, if they are doing anything with the community, are community service activities. Here the objective is generally focused on helping others and is not necessarily tied into what is going on in a social studies course or any other course. Diverse models of community service exist at all grade levels, but most typically, each high school student is required to put in a given number of hours of his or her own time outside of school hours in any type of community organization. The only significant variation in community service is the number of hours that different schools or states require. Maryland requires that all high school students perform seventy-five hours of community service before graduation or participate in an alternative district program approved by the state. Other districts set different numbers of hours.

Examples of community service include K-12 students helping the elderly, working in hospitals or nursing homes, tutoring or babysitting younger children, and one-shot environmental projects such as cleaning up the local creek or improving a hiking trail. The projects do not necessarily have the strong political or social action focus that is present when, for example, a whole class involved in service learning studies a unit on the homeless or monitors a particular local problem over time. Instead, community service is often a concrete task, such as sorting clothes or canned goods, that can be very rewarding for the students. Community service connects students to the social life of the community, but their activity is not necessarily a contribution toward increasing political efficacy or stimulating the political process.

Such volunteer community service has a long history, especially among students in Catholic high schools and independent schools, where usually there is an emphasis on altruism and a concern for the welfare of others less well off than the students. The rationale is that one gives back or repays the community because one has received many benefits from the community. It is hoped that the students will develop empathy for those needing help. The students often feel good about being a volunteer because of the joy of reaching out to others and making a contribution to the community.

It should be noted that the term "volunteer service" may not be accurate because for the student it is not strictly a volunteer activity, but a school requirement. The term "volunteer," however, is appropriate in the sense that students are not compensated for their activities. It has been on this point that the public has voiced its main criticism of community service or service learning. A few students and their parents have objected to the community service requirement, stating that it is a form of indentured servitude and that students should be paid wages for their contribution, especially if the work is done after school hours. This argument goes against the grain of volunteerism, a national movement of connecting people with community organizations that promote uncompensated volunteer community service. Another negative connotation is that some may associate community service with court-ordered community service.

### The Effectiveness of Community Service and Service Learning

Advocates of service learning and of community service do not have much of a research base to support the effectiveness of their programs. Researchers have found it difficult to evaluate the effect of service learning or community service on the students or on the agencies to which the students have contributed their differing amounts of time. The experiences encompass a wide variety of activities ranging from helping a particular political party or interest group to organizing and contributing canned goods to an annual Thanksgiving food drive. Community service may differ, with students in the same class doing entirely different activities, because typically students participate in service projects of their own choosing. The quality of community service varies enormously. Even the same activity - visiting the same hospital or nursing home to read to the residents - may be a different experience for different students, depending upon the day and the hour and the individuals they encounter, as well as on their own subjective evaluation, personality, and characteristics. Furthermore, researchers are in a quandary about what should be their focus. Did the student's academic achievement improve? Did the activity promote personal growth? Political efficacy? Or, the more difficult but important question, will the activity result in future civic participation?

It is no surprise that research findings are mixed and inconsistent (Wade and Saxe 1996). Proponents of community service (Conrad 1991; Conrad and Hedin 1991) may unintentionally

highlight favorable findings and downplay the negative reports. Although greater gains for older students (Melchior and Orr 1995) and for women (Hamilton and Fenzel 1988) have been reported, many if not most studies have not given appropriate attention to the socioeconomic characteristics of students, gender, and the community itself. Adults from all walks of life are involved in community service, but people in the middle class and above, and those with more years of education, are more apt to participate in community service. Unfortunately, one usually reads of what has happened in a given state, or about a study of high school students' experiences working in their community. There is often little description of the students or the community in which the service took place. Although some advocate more social studies research that includes gender and race (Hahn 1996; Avery and Hahn 1985), actual analysis tends to slight those two factors and also socioeconomic characteristics.

### The Community-Service Case Study

The most common support offered for community service is anecdotal evidence and voices from the field in which the student participants and their teachers and administrators express satisfaction with the community service experience. I concur that the first step in evaluation is to ascertain whether the participants have been affected, but research must also go beyond anecdotal evidence.

Having observed classrooms over the semesters in which one hundred or more suburban public high school students have given oral reports about their volunteer community experiences, I can state that most students voiced a very positive response to the endeavor. I can only recall one senior high school student, a young man, who reported that his community experience with the local police was very dull and the police officers did not communicate with him. There may be some subtle pressure for students in giving their reports to be positive because they know that that is what the teacher wants to hear. Nevertheless, a few of the students really get "hooked" on their particular community service, as is evidenced by their putting in more hours than required or continuing to participate even after the requirement has been completed. Evaluation of the community service in those classes was based on completing the hours required by a given date and giving an oral report. All students who met the goal received the grade of A for their community assignment. Lower grades for community service were only given to those students who did not complete the project or were late doing so. In cases in which the class ended without some students' giving an oral report, those students submitted a short written report instead.

Although the community experience received a positive rating, students did not usually give a critique of their community experience, the sponsoring community agency, or the historical background of the problem. During the semester, students gave one brief oral report "when they are ready" to the class on their experience, regardless of whether the class was studying the Constitution or American foreign policy. Overburdened teachers appreciate not having to correct written work, and they believe the oral reports will encourage the others in the class who have not yet started their outside community service. The use of reflection papers or journals is rare, except as a means to record hours spent on the activity. The biggest obstacle to students' completing their community work is the heavy outside work schedules of many of the students. Many high school seniors say, "I've got to work." and feel that they have no time to do the extra community work that the course required.

### The Usefulness of NELS: 88

To help us understand more about community service, the National Longitudinal Study of

1988 (NELS: 88) offers a promising avenue of exploration. NELS: 88 is the latest of 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 of approximately 24,600 eighth-grade students in spring 1988 in four core subject areas: reading, mathematics, science, and history/citizenship/geography. In addition, extensive student, parent, teacher, and school administrator questionnaires were administered in 1988 and 1990, when most of the students were sophomores, and in spring 1992, when most of the students were seniors.

The main focus for my research analysis of NELS: 88 was the responses of seniors in 1992 about what community volunteer work they had done during the past two years. There may be a positive bias to the responses because participation in community service is usually considered a "good" activity. The data used were the reported participation of students: actual participation is not known. However, the data are from a very large national sample that can be generalized to the total U.S. population and are not just the typical small, convenient sample found in most social studies research.

### Community Volunteer Service Question

The question entitled "Community Volunteer Work Past 2 Years," for the 1992 senior class members, was worded as follows:

During the past two years (from January 1, 1990 to the present), have you performed any unpaid volunteer or community service work (through such organizations as Little League, scouts, service clubs, church groups, school groups, or social action groups)?

The question included several prompts to help students recall their community volunteer service. Those who responded yes answered separate questions about the type of volunteer work, whether it was strictly voluntary, court ordered (percent for men and percent for women), or required for class, and then answered further, separate questions with the following prompts on the types of organizations involved: (a) "service organizations, such as Big Brother or Sister"; (b) "political clubs or organizations"; (c) "church or church-related groups, not including worship service"; (d) "community centers, neighborhood improvement or social-action associations or groups"; (e) "organized volunteer group in a hospital or nursing home"; (f) "education organizations"; (g) "a conservation, recycling, or environmental group such as the Sierra Club or the Nature Conservancy."

### Results

Forty-four percent of the 1992 high school seniors surveyed reported having participated in community work during the previous two years, a figure much higher than expected and certainly not a sign of despair about the participation of youth in community service. Participation by young women was statistically greater than that of young men, and Asians and whites also participated more than blacks and Hispanics. Private schools participated substantially more than public, reinforcing the commonly held view. Higher community service participation levels were related to higher economic status, higher education 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 (11 percent or more) of subsidized lunches. High school seniors' participation in community service closely parallels the adult pattern of community participation. The only exception to the adult pattern was the higher participation by urban schools in community service; it [TABULAR DATA

FOR TABLE 1 OMITTED] had been expected that the suburban schools would have the higher participation rate.

Only 17.4 percent of the respondents indicated that community service was required by their schools. That means that most of the community service in 1992 was being done without school community service requirements and was not tied directly with what was going on in the school. We might conclude from that that most teachers may not be aware of the community service that the students in their classrooms are actually doing.

Respondents were then asked to name the types of organizations that they were involved with in doing their volunteer work (table 1). Of interest is that their greatest participation was in church or church-related groups, consistent with adult American participation in churches and with a 1996 Gallup Poll finding that churches are the sources for 60 percent of volunteers. Tocqueville's keen observations of the church's community effects in the 1830s appear valid today. The lowest participation of students was in political groups, small comfort to civic/government teachers, who typically advocate that all should be active in political organizations. Youth group activities (coaching Little League or helping out with scouts) were the single exception to the finding that young women were participating at significantly higher rates than men in all types of organizations (table 1).

TABLE 2 - High School Seniors' Participation in Different Types of Community Organizations by Race/Ethnic Group and Gender

Type of organization	Asian	Hispanic	Black	White
Church group				
Males	40.1 (***)	20.1 (***)	51.5	44.7 (***)
Females	43.9	52.7 (*)	56.9 (*)	51.1 (**)
Youth group				
Males	20.83	26.5	25.9	34.8 (***)
Females	12.8 (***)	13.2 (***)	15.8 (***)	21.6 (***)
Community group				
Males	28.0	22.0	29.1	19.6 (***)
Females	32.2 (***)	25.8	32.1 (**)	26.3 (*)
Education				
Males	21.1	17.1 (*)	23.6	15.5 (***)
Females	24.8	28.5	30.2 (***)	24.9 (***)
Hospital				
Males	23.0	15.2 (*)	10.5 (**)	11.7 (***)
Females	38.1 (***)	22.9	21.3	23.9 (***)
Environmental group				
Males	13.1	8.4 (**)	9.8	12.7
Females	15.6	13.8	8.9 (**)	15.0 (**)
Service				

Males	12.2	7.4 (**)	12.7	10.1 (**)
Females	14.9	9.1 (*)	14.0	14.1 (***)

#### Political group

Males	7.6	7.7	11.6	8.3 (*)
Females	10.7	11.5	15.0 (***)	9.9

\* p [less than] .05; \*\* p [less than] .01; \*\*\* p [less than] .001:  
binomial tests compared to figures in Total column in table 1.

Ethnic and gender differences in volunteer organizations chosen showed the wide variety (table 2). Among the findings were that black women participated in political groups more than any other group and that Hispanic men are the least likely to participate in church groups. White men participated the most in youth groups. Asian women participated highly in hospital groups, and white women had the greatest participation in environmental groups.

#### Students Disliking the Experience

In classes where students have a choice of community service, most teachers employ a broad interpretation of what is a community organization. Typically, at the beginning of the semester, the teacher talks about examples of community projects that previous students have undertaken. A counselor may come to the class to describe some of the agencies that want volunteers. Choice assumes that students know what activity is best for them. If they make a mistake, and a few do, they usually are allowed to change their assignments.

#### Conclusion

Back to the original question, is service learning a good idea? At least as far as high school students are concerned, the data from NELS: 88 indicate that students favor diversity in their choice of community service and that social action is not their first choice. Teachers using service learning should be very careful to allow as much choice as possible, given the wide variation in the popularity of various community organizations, depending on participants' gender and race/ethnic group. The brief descriptions of service learning in the articles in *The Social Studies* did not indicate clearly how much choice students had and the extent of teacher and adult direction. The case study of Anoka (Minn.) High School (Mittlefehldt 1997) did not give an adequate description of the social and economic status of the students and the community, important factors predisposing students to work successfully in the community.

The calls for community and service learning reflect worthy attempts to increase civic participation. Confusion exists, however, about the definitions of service and community learning, even though in actual practice the distinctions between the two may disappear. Teachers using service learning often downplay the reformist element to avoid alarming the community. Service learning, although it has many desirable features, may be difficult for most teachers to implement and may restrict student choices. In contrast, community service can be easier for teachers, especially if the students make their own arrangements, but it has weaknesses, especially if the students do not reflect on their experiences and if their experiences outside of the classroom are not integrated into the curriculum. Using students' present interest in community service as a springboard and following the suggested hints for improvements, teachers may find a better solution for encouraging their students in civic for both service and community learning.

#### APPENDIX



## HELPFUL HINTS FOR DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY SERVICE PROGRAM

Hint 1. Educators should be aware of the political implications of choosing service learning or community service. Service learning has a greater social reconstruction or reform emphasis. Community service reflects a more popular political orientation of giving service back to the local community.

Hint 2. Ask students to complete their community service/service learning about midway in a semester so that it can be better incorporated into the curriculum.

Hint 3. Ask students to do brief written reflection papers. This could be organized as follows: (1) What is the purpose or mission of the organization? (2) What activities does the organization do to try to meet its goals or mission? (3) What appear to be the strengths of the organization? Its weaknesses? (4) What could be done to improve the organization? (5) Would you recommend to a friend or family member that they volunteer to help this group? Why or why not?

Hint 4. Do not fault the family or community but interpret the readiness of students to engage in community or service learning. Just as we would not ignore readiness factors in the teaching of reading, we need to be more aware of students' readiness to participate so that disparities in community participation between racial and ethnic groups, as well as those by gender, can be overcome. Being sensitive to the student and community characteristics may partly account for the success of community and service learning experiences.

Hint 5. Check at the beginning of the semester to learn what volunteer experiences your students have had. Give them prompts similar to the question used by NELLS: 88 so that they remember all they have done.

Hint 6. Let your students choose their own community or service learning projects. If their participation is to be part of a service learning unit, make it a broad unit, such as one on organizations or nonprofit organizations so that students can develop their own assignments. Be aware of what community activities are most likely to be popular with your class.

Hint 7. Be prepared to deal with the frustration that some students may have about their community or service learning assignment. If the teacher restricts the community or service learning to one agency or one focus, some students may not enjoy the experience. Students and their parents resent the lack of choice. If placed in what is felt to be a difficult situation, the student should receive adequate emotional support. This task is similar in some respects to the placement of teachers and student teachers in difficult assignments. Nevertheless, it is a time consuming process for teachers to set up effective seminar type experiences where individuals can openly talk about what is causing them to be unhappy in their assignments and what they can do to improve the situation.

## MORE ON SERVICE LEARNING

Teachers and youth workers who are engaged in community service learning in schools and community agencies will find these two books by Barbara A. Lewis useful.

The Kid's Guide to Service Projects. Paperbound. 1995. 176 pages. ISBN 0-915793-82-2. Free

Spirit Publishing Company, 400 First Avenue North, Suite 616, Minneapolis, MN 554011730. \$10.95.

The book's subtitle is "Over 500 service ideas for young people who want to make a difference." The many ideas suggested are organized into ten subdivisions, including literacy, senior citizens, the environment, animals, crime fighting, transportation, holidays, and health. Lewis provides a ten-step process for successful service projects. She closes the book with some "how-tos" - skill-building tasks that complement her conception of the ten-step process. This slender volume will stimulate the creativity of teachers and their students.

The Kid's Guide to Social Action. Paperbound. 1991. 186 pages. ISBN 0915793-29-6. Free Spirit Publishing Company, 400 First Avenue North, Suite 616, Minneapolis, MN 554011730. \$14.95.

The subtitle of this book is "How to solve the social problems you choose - and turn creative thinking into positive action." In part 1, the author provides step-by-step procedures for doing community action projects, along with brief narratives on student action projects that were successful and satisfying for participants and their clients. Part 2 is a guide to practical politics, offering ways to gain access to power in a community. Saul Alinsky (1909-1972) would have smiled while reading this section of the Lewis book. Part 3 contains descriptions of the many skills needed to initiate or change laws. In part 4, Lewis provides an extensive and useful guide to resources, both people and organizations, across the continent. Part 5 provides readers with sample letters, forms, petitions, and press releases that will spur the creativity and accelerate the activity of youthful activists.

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