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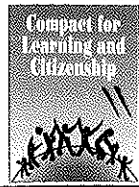
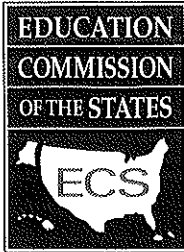
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"...And Justice for All" Community Service-Learning for Social Justice

By Rahima Wade

Introduction: Why Should Service-Learning Address Social Justice?

Community service-learning, the integration of school or community-based service activities with academic skills and structured reflection, is a growing movement in the field of education nationally. With funding and initiatives at the federal, state and private organizational levels, service-learning programs have proliferated in the nation's K-12 classrooms, as well as in colleges and universities.

Service-learning programs across the country address a variety of valuable student outcomes, from academic achievement to civic responsibility. Program goals may include fostering self-esteem, empathy, problem-solving skills or political efficacy. Depending on the population or issue being addressed through the service-learning activities, program leaders also may endeavor to enhance students' appreciation of diversity or the environment, or expand their awareness of career options.

While quality service-learning programs may meet these and other important student goals, an exclusive focus on such discrete outcomes and competencies limit service-learning's power to effect broad-based changes in both students and the communities in which they serve. Too often, program leaders are more concerned with students' personal, social and academic development than they are with working to create meaningful changes in society. Rarely do students in service-learning programs consider whether some injustice has created the need for service in the first place. Nor do they often address injustice through advocacy or political action.

While meeting individual needs in the community is an important aspect of effective citizenship, democracy depends on citizens' willingness and ability to examine current social problems, evaluate how they have developed over time and consider new directions in creating a better society. An important part of the civic mission of schooling is helping students to understand and work toward the country's creed of "justice for all."

If we can create schools where social justice is somewhat a reality — where people are treated decently, humanely and with honesty — then there is a chance that we will teach our children what social justice means. If just once in their lives they see right triumph over wrong, good over evil, justice over inequity, they will at least know that social justice is possible. Ultimately, that's what it's all about: giving young people hope that social justice is not simply a slogan or curriculum package, but something that compels us to treat one another as members of a shared community.

— *George Wood, principal of Federal Hocking High School, Ohio*
(Ayers, Hunt and Quinn, 1998)

Discussing social justice issues in the classroom can be challenging, given their controversial nature. And working for social justice may involve activities focused on long-term change rather than immediate observable benefits. Yet students who are involved in direct service to others in their communities are in an ideal position to examine the historical precedents of the problems they are addressing and to consider what types of efforts might be necessary beyond direct service to lessen the problems they are witnessing firsthand.

This paper discusses how social justice issues can be integrated into high-quality service-learning programs. Combining community service activities with the study of social issues can give students additional ideas for how they can contribute to meaningful societal change and can strengthen service-learning activities by helping students learn the skills, knowledge and attitudes they need to participate in improving the larger society.

What Is Social Justice?

Social justice is a term often referred to but rarely defined. Much more has been written about injustice than the nature of social justice. From a historical and academic perspective, however, several well-known philosophers have defined social justice. Aristotle's view of justice was a rule-based distribution of benefits and burdens among society members to achieve a basic level of goodness for all. Philosopher John Rawls also equated justice with fairness, believing justice would result from the following situation: A group of mutually disinterested individuals, unacquainted with their places in society, if given the charge to divide up society's resources, would inevitably arrive at the creation of a just society that would include an equitable distribution of rights and responsibilities and opportunities for self-development for everyone.

More recently, feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan and others at the Harvard Graduate School of Education Center for the Study of Gender, suggest that the notion of social justice cannot be thought of in purely intellectual terms, that it also encompasses care, relationships and responsibility. Andra Makler, a social studies professor at Lewis and Clark College, asserts that at the root of all conceptions of social justice is some sense of an appropriate social structure and respectful relationships among persons, without regard to race, ethnicity, religion, age, physical ability or sexual orientation.

Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin, professors in the Social Justice Education Program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, define a socially just society as one in which all members have their basic needs met. In addition, they note that in a just society all individuals are physically and psychologically safe and secure, able to develop to their full capacities and capable of interacting democratically with others. While people may disagree about how prevalent social justice is in our society and how best to further equity, most Americans will concur that justice is a core value in our democratic society.

What Are the Essential Elements of Educating for Social Justice?

Social justice education begins with children's experiences and then moves toward fostering a critical perspective and action directed toward social change (Bigelow et al., 1994). While delineations of social justice education vary, an analysis of the sources used in developing this paper point to eight characteristics as essential elements of effective social justice education:

- *Student-Centered*

Students need to feel cared for and respected to learn to trust one another, share ideas openly and collaborate on issues of mutual concern. Teachers need to respect students' abilities, interests and opinions, and encourage students to make connections between themselves and the curriculum.

- *Collaborative*

Effective social justice teachers create a classroom community in which students collaborate with one another to learn, solve problems and mediate conflicts, and effect change. In addition, students should interact with others in the school and community to build equitable partnerships that support mutually shared goals.

- *Experiential*

Student involvement and engagement in mentally and physically active experiences are essential in the social justice classroom. Through projects, role playing, mock trials, simulations and experiments, students experience concepts and key ideas firsthand, rather than just reading or hearing about them.

- *Intellectual*

Social justice education is not just about process; it involves real intellectual work on the part of students and teachers. Students engage in inquiry and research as they interview community members, seek out information through the Internet and examine primary sources. Throughout these experiences, students are asked to apply the skills and knowledge of the curriculum as they examine multiple perspectives on a variety of issues.

- *Analytical*

In searching for ways to create a better world, social justice teachers ask students to critique the status quo, examine underlying assumptions and values, and explore their own roles in relation to social issues. Teachers also ask students to consider whose voices are left out, who makes the decisions, whose stories are buried and how to create change as they uncover various sources of information. Analyzing the causes of injustice in the school, community, society and world is at the heart of social justice education. Reflection in social justice-oriented service-learning projects addresses the controversial nature of the issues under study and asks students to look at how they may be part of the problem, as well as how they can become part of the solution.

- *Multicultural*

One aspect of social justice education is concerned with a conscious and consistent focus on including the history and perspectives of all people, including those with different ethnic backgrounds, physical abilities, religious beliefs, genders, sexual orientations and socioeconomic classes. Every social justice issue under study should employ source materials from multiple perspectives. Teachers must be culturally sensitive in terms of their students as well, seeking out advice from colleagues, parents and community members for working most effectively with students who are culturally different than them.

- *Value-Based*

While educators sometimes like to think of themselves as value-neutral, every classroom decision — from curriculum content to room arrangement to teaching strategies — involves values. The social justice teacher recognizes this fact and welcomes controversy and value-based issues in the curriculum. While respecting students' individual views, teachers also encourage students to come up with reasoned opinions and explain how their ideas support social justice. As Howard Zinn, historian, asserts, it is important for teachers to model the process of taking a stand and sharing their own positions on issues, while reminding students that their opinions, even if different from the teacher's, also are valid.

- *Activist*

Along with learning about social problems and questioning prevailing practices, students need opportunities to work for social change. In particular, social justice teachers encourage students to work for the rights of those who are dominated or marginalized, such as people of color, individuals with disabilities, those who are poor, the very young and very old, and those whose religions or languages are different from the mainstream society. Students often work alongside individuals who have not enjoyed equal rights for mutual support and empowerment.

What Does Service-Learning for Social Justice Look Like?

High-quality community service-learning activities share many of the same characteristics as social justice education. Educators and policymakers interested in incorporating social justice education can use the eight characteristics delineated above as a template for developing service-learning projects aimed at social justice goals. The table below illustrates what each of the eight characteristics might look like in service-learning practice.

Social Justice Education Characteristics	Examples in Service-Learning Practice
Student-centered	Students are involved in choosing the issue of concern for their service-learning project and asked to explain how this issue connects with their own lives.
Collaborative	Students collaborate with their classmates, others in the school and, most important, service recipients, in the design and conduct of the service-learning project.
Experiential	Students are actively engaged in community needs assessment, research and project development, as well as service activities in the school and/or community.
Intellectual	Students seek out a variety of sources with multiple perspectives as they study and analyze the issue they have chosen. They use subject-matter skills and knowledge to plan and carry out their service-learning project.
Analytical	Students examine the root causes of the problem they are addressing. They consider whose voices have been excluded and what their own role is in relation to the problem.
Multicultural	Students adopt an inclusive approach to the problem they are addressing, in terms of understanding the issue from diverse perspectives and also in terms of whom they involve and how they work together on the problem.
Value-based	Students acknowledge the controversial nature of the problem they are addressing. They examine and discuss the values involved.
Activist	Students engage in direct action, as well as advocacy aimed at creating a more socially just society.

The following examples illustrate how these practices work together in real projects with K-12 students, schools and communities. The first two examples are from a research project conducted by Deborah Leta Habib as part of a fellowship through the Corporation for National Service. Habib scoured the country for high schools engaged in service-learning for social justice and wrote up their profiles, along with related discussion questions and classroom activities.

At Malcolm Shabazz City High School in Madison, Wisconsin, several classes engage students in serving for social justice. A technology class created the Equity in Computer Access Project (ECAP) through which students reassemble old computers to donate to families throughout Madison, a local community center and a support network for people with disabilities. Based on an informal poll conducted in their classes, students realized that many of their peers did not have easy access to a computer. Teacher Tina Murray challenged the students to move from the issue to action by asking, "Now you know what the problem is...what are you going to do about it?" Letters from Shabazz students to area businesses netted them 15 computers, \$700 and the launching of ECAP.

Guided by Jane Hammatt Kavolski, school social worker and service-learning coordinator, students are engaged in a host of other social justice-oriented service-learning projects as well, including a course on Amnesty International, in which English students develop writing and advocacy skills, and Women's Issues in Our Society, through which Shabazz students mentor middle school girls and conduct an educational campaign during Sexual Assault Week.

Throughout these courses and others, students engage in reflection, ask and answer questions about the causes of the injustices they are addressing, publicize their efforts through the media and explore ways that they can be part of the solution.

* * *

Far from the Midwest, in coastal Connecticut, students from Waterford High School participate in a unit on "Facing Hatred" as part of Meredith Baker's 10th-grade English class. Curriculum activities include analyzing poems, articles and films that explore stereotypes and discrimination, and reading excerpts from books such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Journal entries and poetry writing engage students in personal reflections, creative writing and critical analysis. The unit culminates in a student-chosen service-learning project. In the past, some groups have conducted workshops on stereotypes for 6th graders, while others have presented a day-long conference for peers and local community members. Finally, students write reflection papers that describe the impact the course and their service experiences had on them; many willingly read these papers aloud in class. The district's service-learning coordinator, Jen Riley Welsh, and the high school's 15-member Student Steering Committee support all of these activities.

* * *

Students at Lucas School in Iowa City, Iowa, began their inquiry when their teacher, Alfreda Gatlin Dixon, was contacted by the local public library to review a decade-old list of children's books on African Americans. Students used books from the public library and their school library to revise and update the list, recommending new books to be purchased, as well as some with stereotypical portrayals to be deleted. Older students were paired with younger students to fill out a questionnaire on each book. Additional service activities at the public library involved setting up a display of the new books and using several of them in a story hour for younger children. The students also shared their list with the school librarian, who purchased several of the recommended books for students' use.

In all three examples, students question societal issues, consider diverse perspectives and make decisions about ways to effect change. The students are engaged in meaningful academic learning while making significant contributions to their communities, and they collaborate with individuals in the school and community to address controversial and important issues in society.

Experienced service-learning practitioners reading this paper may ask, "So what is the difference between service-learning for social justice and high-quality service-learning? Aren't the aspects of service-learning discussed what skilled service-learning teachers do anyway?"

Yes and no. Service-learning for social justice emphasizes student initiative and choice, community voice and multiple perspectives. Perhaps most unique is the emphasis placed on examining larger structural issues and the role they play in creating local needs and problems. In practice, many K-12 service-learning programs never involve students in considering the root causes of societal inequities or engage students in advocacy beyond direct service. Program leaders and their students often are more comfortable and familiar with direct service or are unfamiliar with resources for teaching and learning about societal issues from broader and diverse perspectives. Advocacy activities, such as letter writing, may be seen as less interesting or personally fulfilling than working one-on-one with persons in need.

Social change efforts may involve less glamour, longer-term effort and, at times, an inability to assess whether one's efforts are making a difference. Yet working for broad-based change allows students to influence more lives than they can through working with single individuals in the local community.

What Are Some Challenges To Creating Service-Learning Programs for Social Justice? How Can Teachers, Administrators and Policymakers Address Them?

There are several key challenges to developing quality service-learning programs that support social justice goals. Those listed below are not linear or hierarchical. While they are discussed separately here, it is important to note that they overlap and interact with one another. Thus, many of the strategies used to address one challenge may be effective in addressing one or more of the other challenges as well. As every community and school system has its own unique character, teachers, administrators and policymakers should decide for themselves which of the challenges and strategies are most significant for their particular setting.

Challenge #1 — Developing consensus about and commitment to social justice

An initial challenge in developing a service-learning program aimed at social justice goals is for administrators and teachers to come to an agreement about what social justice means and what aspects they can support as a team. Questions that might guide this discussion include the following: What issues are of most concern to our school, students and community? What are the potential risks of addressing certain issues? What are the possible gains? How can our school community best support equal rights and opportunity for all people in our community?

I ask of teachers and administrators: What messages are prevailing in your classrooms? For any child, the proper and consistent nurturing of their capacities for greatness makes all the difference in the world. To me, this is the social justice issue in education for the new millennium.

— Luis Rodriguez, poet, journalist and founder of Tia Chucha Press in Chicago
(Ayers, Hunt and Quinn, 1998)

Effective strategies for developing consensus and commitment to social justice

- Organize opportunities for teachers and administrators to discuss their views of social justice and how it is supported (or not) in the current service-learning program.
- Read about others' views of social justice and discuss these as well. (See the references and resources at the end of this paper for possibilities).
- Attempt to come to consensus about a view of social justice or particular social issues that can be embraced by the majority of those involved with the service-learning program.
- Brainstorm specific activities that support a vision of service-learning for social justice. For example, perhaps the faculty is uncomfortable with engaging students in political action but can rally around the idea of a letter-writing campaign to increase voter registration among those typically underrepresented at the polls. It is important that administrators and teachers put "a face" on social justice and what it might look like in their school.
- Ensure that state commissions on community service include diverse perspectives, including those of people who are marginalized and individuals involved with organizations that work for social justice.
- Support the development of a statewide network of educators committed to service-learning for social justice.
- Exhibit leadership in efforts to promote social justice-oriented service-learning programs. The language of social justice and recommendations for service-learning programs could be included in local, state and federal standards. Examples of social justice-oriented service-learning projects can be featured in speeches, publications, opinion articles, and radio or television shows.

Challenge #2 — Hesitance to question the status quo

A second limitation involves hesitance to stand up for those who are experiencing injustice and to oppose groups or organizations that may be perpetuating injustice or maintaining the status quo. Social justice-oriented service-learning activities involve students in questioning how they and others in the community address issues of inequity and injustice. While some social justice projects will be easily embraced — such as the African-American book project — some activities may prove threatening when long-standing practices are questioned. One of the risks is that teachers or administrators could be labeled as "troublemakers" or "rebels."

The teaching is never solely about how the oppressed have become victims, though it is about that; it is also about how people individually and in concert have made a difference and changed their situations. Thus, I teach not only about the root causes of racial, sexual, class and other forms of oppression, but also about the triumphs of the abolitionists; the suffragettes; the labor, civil rights and anti-war movements; and all those who, with knowledge of their condition, were able to change it for the better.

— *Haywood Burns, former law professor and dean, City University of New York*
(*Ayers, Hunt and Quinn, 1998*)

Effective strategies to counter hesitance to question the status quo:

- Remind educators that "justice for all" is an important part of the principles in a democratic society.
- Encourage teachers to accept the controversial nature of this work and support their successful efforts publicly through speeches and publications.

- Encourage teachers to communicate with parents ahead of time about the project, its importance to students' growth and development, and its connections to the curriculum.
- Connect service-learning for social justice principles with current school reform efforts, the district's strategic plan and district policies on curriculum, instruction, community relations and student activities.
- Develop a list of social justice issues that teachers can address that are aligned with district or state standards and policies (such as anti-harassment policies, multicultural nonsexist policies, school-to-work legislation or character education).
- Develop a district policy or service-learning program goals encouraging and supporting teachers' implementation of social justice-oriented service-learning activities.
- Work with the school board to gain members' understanding and support.
- Recognize and publicize outstanding projects that make a difference in the community or state.

Challenge #3 – Limited time and curriculum resources

Developing quality service-learning activities aimed at social justice goals takes time and creativity. Teachers generally have little planning time available, and curriculum resources for social justice education are limited. Effective service-learning projects must be site-specific, that is, they must be developed based on student interest and needs, curriculum mandates and local needs or problems in the community. Only teachers who are creative and committed to seeking out the resources and information needed will be able to design quality service-learning activities with their students. Administrators and policymakers can help by supporting teachers' needs for planning time and curriculum resources to develop high-quality, social justice-oriented programs.

Effective strategies to counter the challenge of limited time and curriculum resources:

- Increase teachers' planning time.
- Encourage teacher teams to plan a project together, dividing up the work.
- Encourage teachers to involve their students in helping to research and plan the project.
- Purchase curriculum resources for social justice-oriented service-learning projects for teachers' use.
- Help teachers define how service-learning fits into the district's mission and goals, including how service-learning for social justice can contribute to assessment of student learning.
- Offer district-sponsored professional development on service-learning for social justice.
- Seek out and encourage teachers to take courses at local colleges and universities on service-learning and/or social justice.
- Sponsor mini-grants for teachers to plan social justice service-learning-oriented projects.
- Hire a school-based or district service-learning coordinator to assist teachers with planning, making community contacts and developing quality projects.
- Support state funding for service-learning programs with social justice goals, such as Minnesota's per-capita expenditure for service-learning.

- At local and state levels, provide ongoing training and technical assistance for teachers and administrators to promote understanding of and commitment to service-learning for social justice.
- Seek to increase financial and administrative support for social justice-oriented service-learning programs at all levels. Support the integration of service-learning into relevant federal and state education and youth development program authorizations.

Challenge #4 — Restrictions on the uses of external funding

Another limitation lies in the sources of funding for service-learning programs. Federal funds (such as K-12 Learn and Serve America funds distributed to state agencies via the Corporation for National Service) have limitations on their use, especially in regard to advocacy, lobbying government officials, political activity and supporting partisan bills or government activities.

Effective strategies to counter the restrictions on uses of external funding:

- Encourage teachers to familiarize themselves with these restrictions and to adjust their teaching plans accordingly.
- Provide district funds for planning, transportation and other associated costs for implementing service-learning activities.

I believe that teaching the skills and perspectives needed for real participation in a democratic society is one of the most revolutionary tasks that an educator committed to social justice can undertake. It is only through such education that we can hope to create a truly just society where the most disenfranchised of our citizens can gain access to the political power needed to change the world.

— Lisa Delpit, director, Center for Urban Educational Excellence, Georgia State University.
(Ayers, Hunt and Quinn, 1998)

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Additional Resources for Service-Learning for Social Justice

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Dingerson, Leigh, and Hay, Sarah (1998). *The CoMotion Guide to Youth-Led Social Change*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Justice.

Fleisher, Paul (1993). *Changing Our World: A Handbook for Young Activists*. Tucson, AZ: Zephyr Press.

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Social Justice Education Organizations

Constitutional Rights Foundation
www.crf-usa.org
213-487-5590

Educators for Social Responsibility
www.esrnational.org
800-370-2515

Institute for Democracy in Education
614-593-4531

National Association of Multicultural Education
www.nameorg.org
202-628-6263

National Coalition of Education Activists
www.teachingforchange.org
914-876-4580

Rethinking Schools
www.rethinkingschools.org
414-964-9646

Southern Poverty Law Center
www.teachingtolerance.org
334-264-0268

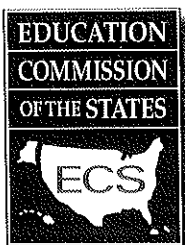
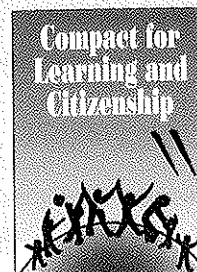
About the Author

Wade is associate professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Iowa. She is former project director of the National Service-Learning in Teacher Education Partnership and author of more than 50 book chapters and articles on community service-learning.

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The Compact for Learning and Citizenship (CLC), a project of the Education Commission of the States, provides K-12 school leaders, legislators and other education stakeholders with resources, profiles and strategies to integrate service-learning through practice and policy. District superintendents, chief state school officers and other interested parties are invited to join. The CLC Web site (www.ecs.org/clc) also provides links to other organizations, clearing-houses, publications and resources. Contact Lou A. Myers, director, 303-299-3644 or lmyers@ecs.org.



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