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ABSTRACT

Researchers have found that high-quality service learning programs are rich with benefits for schools, communities, and students. One hallmark of successful service learning programs is that they honor youth voice (meaning that they include young people in the creation and implementation of service opportunities). Elementary, middle, and high school students can all contribute meaningfully to their communities and shape service learning experiences with their ideas and insights. Because of the many benefits, many schools now strongly encourage or mandate service hours as a requirement for graduation. Research has identified strategies for overcoming the following challenges facing service learning: (1) not everyone shares the same definition of "youth voice"; (2) adults and young people have preconceived notions about one another's understanding of and capacity for a truly successful youth voice component; (3) not everyone in the organization buys into the concept or practice of youth voice or wants it incorporated; (4) youth voice often becomes merely the "tokenizing" of young people; (5) the teacher, educator, or other adult has difficulty relinquishing decision-making responsibilities to young people. (The strategies are included, along with six research-identified recommendations for adults, eight recommendations for policymakers, and seven recommendations for young people involved in service learning. The bibliography lists 47 references/resources and the World Wide Web addresses of 24 resource organizations.) (MN)

Learning in Deed Issue Paper

Integrating Youth Voice in Service Learning

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Integrating Youth Voice in Service-Learning

Introduction

By all accounts, the growth of youth service in this country has been phenomenal. According to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, the number of students involved in service-learning programs, which connects service with classroom instruction, increased by 3,663% between 1984 and 1997. A 1999 survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education reported that 64% of all public schools and 83% of all public high schools have some form of community service for their students. Currently, about 12 million K-12 students are involved in service and service-learning activities and many thousands of other young people provide service through community-based organizations.

Yet a new national study commissioned by the service organization Do Something (Arnold Communications, 2000) revealed a troubling dimension to this picture. The study examined the service experiences of 1,000 randomly selected young people who are or had recently been part of a community service or service-learning program. It found that even in this time of dramatic increases in youth service, civic engagement – a sustained commitment to service and community building – had declined. It appears that while many of these young people were involved, they were not truly compelled by their experiences.

Research indicates that youth become dissatisfied with service experiences when they are not actively involved. In this paper, we will use “youth voice” to mean the inclusion of young people as a meaningful part of the creation and implementation of service opportunities. Youth voice enables young people to build upon service-learning and to act as catalysts for social change. When youth voice is missing from a service program, young people may feel more discouraged and alienated. To them, service becomes just one more place in their lives where their ideas are not respected and their contributions are unimportant.

This issue paper examines the rationale for the implementation of youth voice in service-learning initiatives, examines challenges practitioners may face and offers strategies for success. It includes case studies profiling exemplary programs across the nation and perspectives from youth, school administrators, service-learning advocates and state policymakers. In addition, the paper provides recommendations and resources for schools, organizations and policymakers who are interested in incorporating a strong and meaningful youth voice component within their field of work.

“I Now Know I Can Make a Difference”: A Youth on Youth Voice

Jennifer Zeisler, 20, is a junior at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, where she is studying Professional Communications. At 14, she joined the Youth Advisory Committee as part of the Michigan Community Foundations Youth Project. During her senior year in high school, she served on the State Youth Board. Her long-term goal is to work with a foundation or nonprofit agency that works with and benefits youth.

Youth voice is the concept that young people are respected for their ideas and opinions and are free to state them within an organization or program. Youth voice is an asset to any organization, but especially to those that serve youth. Youth know best what they need and can play an important role in deciding how to get it, but often society socializes them to think that their opinions don't count and that adults know what is best for them.

Youth want to be heard. They have new ideas and different perspectives than adults. They want to make their mark in the world and affect those around them. Youth want to shape the future because that is where they will live their lives.

Allowing youth the chance to be heard in service organizations will have the strongest effect on our society and its future. Youth will develop lifelong values of generosity and leadership and at the same time will be building a stronger and more caring community. By giving youth a voice today, we give them the strength to lead tomorrow.

The Youth Advisory Committee and the Youth Board on which I participated gave me a way to express the ideas that I had. I learned about my community and helped my community to understand youth. I helped to address the problems that I saw. I assisted with the development and growth of other youth organizations because they listened to my ideas, and I had influence over funding them. I also grew close to other adults and youth in my community.

As a young adult now, I can look back to the time spent on youth boards and see how those experiences changed my life. I have a better appreciation of the fact that everyone has valuable ideas and opinions. I see the importance of bridging the gap between youth and adults. The decisionmaking and problem-solving skills have enabled me to create effective solutions. I have a growing appreciation of my community and the people in it. With the trust I was given to make challenging decisions and the effort that I put into each one, I built confidence in myself. I now know that with knowledge and hard work, I can make a difference.

Based on my own experience, there are several things I would recommend to organizations wanting to increase youth voice in their service programs. First of all, value the young people. Don't put them on a board or committee without truly listening to their opinions. Use youth for the right reasons – because you respect their ideas and you want their input for your organization. Make sure that young people and those who work with them have the training they need in organizational language, policy, procedure, as well as group dynamics and decisionmaking. And don't just recruit "leaders," but find others who may be introverted or known as troublemakers. They can often bring the best and most creative perspectives to the table.

Rationale for Youth Voice Within Service-Learning

Researchers have found that high-quality service-learning programs are rich with benefits for schools, communities and most of all students. One of the hallmarks of these successful programs is that they honor youth voice. They do so by providing opportunities for students to plan their service experiences with adult assistance and make decisions and solve problems related to the service. Effective programs also contain well-organized service experiences that meet genuine community needs and time allotted for students to reflect upon and learn from their experiences (Billig, 2000).

Documented benefits from these programs are plentiful and wide-ranging. In the area of academic achievement, studies have shown that participation in service-learning was linked with higher scores on the state test of basic skills (Anderson, Kinsley, Negroni, and Price, 1991); improved grades and increased attendance (Follman, 1998); increased classroom participation (Loesch-Griffin, Petrides, and Pratt, 1995); and improved problem-solving skills (Stephens, 1995). In terms of behavior, service-learning participants have evidenced more positive and respectful relationships with peers and teachers (Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, and Rovner, 1998) and shown fewer behavioral problems (Stephens, 1995; Switzer, Simmons, Dew, Regalski, and Wang, 1995; Yates and Youniss, 1996). Other studies have found students with service-learning experience had a greater acceptance of cultural differences (Melchior, 1999; Berkas, 1997); were committed to service now and later in life (Melchior, 1999; Berkas, 1997); and showed greater empathy and cognitive complexity than comparison groups (Courneya, 1994).

After reviewing numerous studies on service-learning, researcher Shelley Billig observed that “[an] in-depth analysis of the combined studies shows that these outcomes are maximized when students are given greater degrees of responsibility for planning, decisionmaking, problem solving and assessing their learning.” In other words, youth voice is not only an essential component of high-quality service-learning programs but also helps to magnify positive results.

In a related study, another team of researchers examined 60 urban neighborhood-based organizations over a five-year period. In inner-city areas that were commonly characterized by youth violence and despair, researchers found youth voice was a critical component of organizations that were successful in motivating youth participation and helping young people to “find a different path.” Staff of these organizations believed that “Youth in the community [were] a resource to be developed, not a problem to be managed.” The organizations “[were] youth driven and sensitive to the everyday realities, values, aspirations, and interests of young people” and able to “empower young people and develop their competencies through challenging, prodding ... and providing multiple opportunities for practice and experience” (McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman, 1994).

Another body of research corroborates the findings on youth voice and service-learning programs. Resiliency research, which examines ways in which people become healthy and competent adults in spite of significant childhood adversity, has identified a triad of “protective factors.” These factors – which help to protect youth from the harmful impact of abuse, neglect, poverty, parental divorce or illness and other problems – are caring relationships, high expectations and opportunities for meaningful participation (Werner and Smith, 1982; Werner, 1990; Benard, 1991). According to research analyst Bonnie Benard, meaningful participation is characterized by “problem solving, decisionmaking, planning, goal-setting and helping others” (Burns, 1994) – an apt description of service-learning. And of course, effective service-learning programs incorporate the other two protective factors, caring relationships and high expectations. This research sheds additional light upon the capacity for service-learning programs to effect lasting and positive behavioral change in participants.

In summary, the inclusion of youth voice is crucial to the overall effectiveness of service-learning programs. Youth voice has a tremendous impact on program participation and program outcomes, both short term and long term.

From Minimum Interest to Maximum Participation

Until just a few years ago, both young people and teachers at Grand Junction High School in Grand Junction, Colorado, had balked at the required 30 hours of service. Students were only barely meeting the minimum requirements. Virtually any form of community service was credited and only a brief reflection period was included. Few connections were made between what was being learned in the field and how that learning applied to students’ daily lives and studies.

When Program Coordinator Judy Jepson took over the program in 1996, she looked to the students – both to understand their declining interest in community service and to find ways to shift to a service-learning model that would tie service work to the curriculum. A small group of student volunteers agreed to conduct surveys with peers and teachers. From their findings, these students developed what they believed would be an ideal service-learning program that met the needs of both students and community members. Jepson facilitated the process and acted as a team player, allowing students to shape the program for themselves.

The students devised three key components for the program. First, they envisioned a series of service-learning options for students in various fields of interest. Second, they recommended the formation of an executive committee of 20 self-selected members who would oversee operations. And last, they designed a “Bringing Standards to Students” program that would engage all students in learning about and participating in the schoolwide adoption of state standards.

As students began powering their own service-learning experiences, a dramatic increase occurred not only in the number of hours students participated but in the number of students who were eagerly engaged in activities. All 1,700 students now complete an average of 70 service hours each – 40 hours beyond the school mandate. A “Millennium Club” honors students who perform 100 hours or more by presenting them with special tassels to wear on their graduation cap.

The program also endeavors to include students who might otherwise feel marginalized in the school’s academic climate. Students who are struggling academically – particularly those with limited English proficiency – are recruited and trained to become tutors for elementary school students. Both older and younger students find their grades and self-confidence grow as a result of this unusual partnership. The service-learning program now includes an annual day of service focused on a community issue, a grant-writing initiative, a student-published quarterly newsletter, the Youth on Board program in which students serve as board members in agencies funded by United Way, and the “Teen Court” collaboration with the city attorney’s office in which students charged with a crime can be judged by peers instead of receiving formal charges. Other groups exist and new ones are developed as students create them. Students currently manage, track and document the program in its entirety through a comprehensive database.

Judy Jepson says that outreach is crucial. She reports that students are repeatedly invited to participate in service-learning activities from their first weeks at school. For example, older students host an annual “Youth Service Day” in which all freshmen work in teams of ten on various projects in the community. In another example, every student receives a booklet that lists service opportunities available that semester.

Jepson notes, “A youth-owned program enables all different types of young people to shift from one type of leadership to another as they seek and create roles that are of interest to them. You don’t get that with an adult-driven model.”

A Developmental Approach

Service-learning and youth voice aren’t just for adolescents. Even the youngest children can contribute meaningfully to their communities – and shape service experiences with their ideas and insights.

Involving students in elementary and middle schools isn’t just an attractive idea; it’s good practice. Studies in the field of service-learning indicate that youth are more likely to benefit from and remain engaged in community activities if they are involved prior to their teenage years (Lesko and Tsourounis, 1998; Constitutional Rights Foundation and the Close-Up Foundation, 1995). While once quite rare, there are now credible service-learning programs for younger students located throughout the country.

Several initiatives are currently increasing the number of high-quality service-learning programs available to both younger and older students. One of them is Learning In Deed, sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and designed to broaden service-learning experiences in K-12 education. Five demonstration states – California, Maine, Minnesota, Oregon and South Carolina – are using their grants to more fully integrate service-learning in the schools through practice and policy.

In South Carolina, Learning In Deed has involved youth and children from throughout the state in vital district- and state-level policymaking procedures. “We allow [young people] to address policy and state issues and work with the State Board of Education because they are more articulate and can speak to their needs better than we can,” explains Karen Horne of the South Carolina Department of Education. The state’s engagement with youth voice was furthered last year when the South Carolina Association of School Administrators held a legislative conference that included a five-member youth panel to address service-learning. The panel was so successful that youth were invited to present two sessions at the organization’s summer leadership institute. One of the panels included a 3rd and 4th grader. Horne attributes their success in working with such young participants to the fact that “our service-learning districts have a pre-K-16 approach.”

There are several key considerations when involving elementary and middle school students:

- *Make age-appropriate modifications in the areas of expectations, training and support.* Program staff need to carefully consider children's skill level and abilities and tailor programs accordingly. Like their older colleagues, younger students need opportunities for ongoing training and support and thoughtful discussions about their experiences. Staff can encourage even the youngest children to make certain decisions and solve problems related to their service experiences.

Sometimes it is necessary to alter the capacity and setting in which young people can contribute. For example, children may have difficulty deciphering grant applications if they are sitting on a local funding board. However, those same children could solicit and read grants for small projects within the school. Having children practice their skills within a school or organization before interacting on a communitywide level also ensures a more successful experience.

- *Identify and involve children who already display leadership qualities.* Elementary students who have shown leadership qualities in previous experiences seem to integrate most successfully in a youth voice arena. This prior experience can come from significant involvement in cultural groups, religious events or service organizations in the community.
- *Provide opportunities for children to learn through role modeling.* In most school districts with service-learning programs, there are ample opportunities for younger children to learn from older ones. In South Carolina, where opportunities for service begin in elementary school, young students not only work on smaller activities but also occasionally watch older students as they work on more comprehensive projects.

Joel Rodgers, a senior at Britton's Neck High School in Columbia, South Carolina, played an instrumental role in his school's service-learning program. He and his peers constructed a fire station in their small, rural community after conducting a needs assessment with local residents. "When I was younger, I looked up to a lot of the athletes in the older grades," remarked Rodgers. "When I saw them out doing community service, I wanted to do it to get close to them. Now there is a younger student at my school who looks up to me, and so I have to make sure I am always setting an example."

- *Build youth voice into the creation and structure of an organization.* Just as students at Grand Junction High School were invited to create and direct the service-learning program at their school, younger students can be asked to give critical input into the way their service-learning program is operated. This can be done in a number of ways: soliciting youth input on the design of a program, having youth membership on oversight boards and committees, asking young people to help investigate and choose the service venues, and asking children to help train other kids in service procedures.

Carter Hendricks, the service-learning coordinator for the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, integrated youth voice at the beginning of the grant process when his department was issuing applications for Learning In Deed, and Learn and Serve grants. "With these grants, we established criteria that said potential grantees were required to have a certain number of youth in the grantwriting process. Youth were to sign off on the grant and have a meaningful, continued involvement in the evolution [of the grant]." Hendricks added, "We asked specific questions of adults that they had to address in the application: 'What role did youth have in the process? How will you authentically involve youth?' We wanted to make sure that youth were not being tokenized but were actually engaged in the process."

Hearing the Youngest Voices

At the **Hubert Kindergarten Center** in Hudson, Massachusetts, all 200 of the school's students are involved in service-learning projects. Hudson, a middle-class town of about 18,000 people with a large number of Portuguese-speaking families from Brazil, Portugal and the Azores, is located about an hour's drive west of Boston. The self-contained Kindergarten Center serves five- and six-year-old students and is part of the Hudson Public Schools.

Teachers begin the year by discussing the importance of community service with the students. As the year progresses, the children engage in a variety of increasingly complex service projects. All projects are woven into such curricular areas as health and nutrition, math, social studies and literacy. Youth voice is cultivated by asking these students to make small but significant decisions about their service projects. For example, during the yearly December toy drive, teachers instruct parents to assist their children in selecting toys and imagining the lives of the children who will be receiving those gifts. New toys are accepted but ones brought from the children's own toy chests are preferred. "By choosing among their own toys," says Principal Linda Corbin, "the students can more readily live the idea of giving something of themselves to the community."

Every spring, children's service efforts culminate in a project called "The Quilt Makers." After studying books about the problems of homelessness, students also learn about quilts – their history, their importance to families, and the warmth and beauty they provide. They explore the idea of making a class quilt and then giving it to Spring House, a nearby shelter for homeless women who are pregnant or have newborn babies.

Guided by their teachers, the children make many of the decisions about the quilts: what kinds of cloth to use, what designs are appropriate for an infant, and what they would like to say to the child once he or she gets older. After drawing a practice design on paper, each student then uses a fabric marker to create one block of the quilt. Through a grant from the school district, the Kindergarten Center is able to hire one of the mothers to sew the quilts from all the classes. The students bring home the completed quilts so that every family can spend one night with the students' creation and record in a special journal their thoughts and feelings about the quilt. At the end of the project, the quilts and the journals are given to the director of the homeless shelter to distribute to the new and expectant mothers. This year, 10 of these quilts will be given to the women and their infants.

According to Corbin, "We involve the kids in many forms of decisionmaking, but first we have to lay a groundwork of understanding. We have to create knowledge that there are people in our community who are in need and that we are fortunate in what we have. When we adults give the needed information, the students are then empowered to make a difference."

On the other side of the country, in The Dalles, Oregon, a small garden is transforming the way that students, teachers and community members relate to each other. Located in a courtyard at **Chenoweth Elementary School** and funded by a grant from a local medical center, the garden is carefully tended by students in all of the classes.

From its inception, the garden has fostered a strong collaboration between school staff and children. At the beginning of the project, students, teachers and parents labored together to create six raised flowerbeds. An art teacher at the school, assisted by his 4th and 5th grade students, painted over graffiti to create colorful, butterfly-filled murals on the walls surrounding the garden. The school secretary, Liz Clark, is a master gardener who teaches the children about taking care of the soil and the plants. Students often assist her in teaching other students about the needs of the garden. And students are the ones who, with guidance from Clark, grow plants from seed, water and weed the garden, harvest flowers and vegetables, and make compost to fertilize the soil. Knowledge about the garden has in some way been integrated into every class's curriculum.

Students also have chosen some of the projects that have tied the school to the surrounding community. For example, 4th graders last year studied songbirds and then decided to make bird feeders and give them to senior citizens. Some other children raised plants from seed and then chose to give the tomato plants, peppers or flowers to grandparents and other seniors who were invited to come to the school. Young gardeners proudly take parents and other community members on tours of the different beds, which now include a butterfly garden, an herb garden, and a garden of steppe plants that are native to the arid part of the state where The Dalles is situated.

Chenowith is in a low-income area where 80% of the school's 370 students qualify to receive free or reduced lunches. Many of the students come from homes without a yard or garden. Clark suspects that the lack of a garden in many students' homes fuels their passion for the garden at the school. She also perceives that the garden has made parents feel more comfortable at the school, particularly those with limited-English ability who had felt ill at ease in the school environment.

Stevie Blakely, the school's principal, sees other tangible benefits from students' involvement with the garden. Since it became part of the school, there has been a marked improvement in attendance rates and a reduction in office referrals. "Basically, I believe this has happened because kids have ownership of the garden," she asserts. "They're here at recess time, lunch time, before and after school, pulling weeds and planting flowers. There's an unspoken rule that when you're in the garden, it's a peaceful place. Kids are often out there reading or just thinking. It's a big part of their lives."

Service-Learning Leads to Civic Engagement and Social Advocacy

Because of the many positive results from service, numerous schools throughout the country now strongly encourage service or mandate service hours as a requirement for graduation. Especially in the wake of school tragedies caused by alienated youth, educators are more than ever looking at community service and service-learning as a means to reestablish the vital relationship between youth and community.

Yet in the rush to impose mandatory service hours, schools are frequently substituting quantity of hours for quality of experience. Instead of motivating youth to become good citizens with a lifelong interest in service, these schools may inadvertently be doing just the opposite. When service is imposed from above without youth input and without adequate structure and support, young people may view their service experiences with indifference, suspicion or even hostility. Many young people will lose interest in community engagement because they have never learned how to translate concern or frustration with social issues into productive action.

On the other hand, Wendy S. Lasko, president of Activism 2000, a national youth activism clearinghouse, believes that "service-learning can be a natural springboard to civic responsibility and social advocacy." In well-designed service-learning programs, the service tends to strengthen relationships between young people, adults and society. When that happens, results can be seen long after the students have left school. Years later, young people are more likely to be engaged in community organizations and voting and more likely to be politically active (Youniss, McClellan, and Yates, 1997; Yates and Youniss, 1997; Morgan and Streb, 1999).

There are two main ways that educators can facilitate their students' appreciation for civic responsibility. The first is to establish the connection between service-learning and civic responsibility through the program curricula. When students gain an in-depth understanding of the social and/or political issues that affect their community, they are more motivated and capable of addressing genuine community needs. The second is to encourage students to take some form of social action based upon their service, such as writing letters to legislators, investigating an injustice or inventing a new and needed kind of service. As Shelley Billig points out, "... helping the homeless by collecting food does not produce the same outcome as researching the cause of homelessness and surveying the homeless about their conditions."

As students experience the whole spectrum of service – from learning about the causes of a problem to providing service to having an active role in changing a situation – they learn that their ideas and actions can indeed make a difference. That simple but powerful realization is the basis upon which all civic engagement is built. That unshakable confidence in young people's ability to bring about needed community change can make all the difference in the future of young people, as well as the future civic health of the country.

Connecting Youth to the Community

At Fresh Youth Initiatives (FYI) in the Washington Heights area of New York City, youth initiative and decision making are the driving forces behind all community service projects. Begun in 1993, the organization is structured on the premise that young people are the best ones to assess their community's needs and offer solutions. Program participants have organized a traveling clothing bank and food pantry, written and conducted peer-to-peer anti-drug workshops and developed a popular program in which they construct sleeping bags for the homeless and fill them with toiletries and sandwiches prior to distribution. FYI participants also tutor peers, paint murals, clean parks and remove graffiti. Through their work, young people access community members and other organizations for resources, learning and support. Because their efforts are dedicated to a specific neighborhood, the community recognizes them on a regular basis, which further enhances and strengthens their community engagement.

An impressive facet of FYI's peer training model is that trainers are chosen based on their experience in the program, not their age. Therefore, younger participants sometimes train their older colleagues. FYI staff and participants also promote the idea of youth voice programming through their Center for Community Service Education, which assists colleagues in other agencies with beginning and sustaining youth service efforts.

Karina, an 11-year-old FYI volunteer, says, "I like doing service in my community. Besides, I have more friends now and it's really fun." Another young participant summarized the value of the program by stating: "It is good for people to see that kids today care about their community and are working to make it a better place."

Founded in 1993, **Do Something** began with the idea that young people could change the world if they believed in themselves and had the tools to take action. Using a project-centered approach, Do Something recognizes young people as effective leaders and provides them with the skills they need to achieve this leadership on an ongoing basis.

Do Something's primary principle is that the success of all community building depends upon young people's understanding and ownership of their roles. In multi-site research conducted this spring, participants in Do Something identified this feeling of ownership as the single most important part of their involvement with the organization and the way in which service-learning differs from other areas of their lives.

In this model, adults are neither controlling nor absent. Rather, adults and educators act as "Community Coaches," facilitators and guides who help young people gain the skills they need. Young people build their skills, as well as their sense of personal commitment by planning and completing service-learning projects of their own design. They research problems in their schools and neighborhoods, identify opportunities and decide upon a course of action. Some projects are small and discrete, such as leading school participation in a community walk to raise funds to fight Multiple Sclerosis. Others involve more extensive commitments of time and resources, such as addressing low voter participation among neighborhood residents. A staff member observes, "When driven entirely by their own interests and concerns, young people are more likely to get to the root of the problems and not just to the symptoms."

Sustaining Civic Involvement

Service-learning is not mandatory at Malcolm Shabazz High School in Madison, Wisconsin. Yet most students elect to participate. They are excited about their involvement in planning projects, engaging the community and learning from their experiences.

One of the strong outcomes of Shabazz's inclusion of youth voice within its service-learning model is the civic engagement that it promotes. Jane Hammatt Kavaloski, social worker and service-learning

coordinator at the school, believes that students' involvement in service-learning will lead to a lifelong commitment to civic engagement. "We are trying to attach a strong civic action piece to their program so that they are writing officials about local issues and concerns they have and feeling confident in their ability to implement change."

Last year, the White House cited Shabazz as a national model in combining academics with civic responsibility. Student projects at the school illustrate the actions behind this recognition. In one recent example, 10 students put themselves in wheelchairs for a day to test the accessibility of businesses in the downtown area. They found that more than half of the businesses had significant obstacles that prevented people with disabilities from shopping or eating in those facilities. Students studied the Americans with Disabilities Act in class and then alerted business owners to potential violations through a letter-writing campaign. Many owners have already looked into, or addressed, the charges.

Another organization that involves young people with policy change is Earth Force, an environmentally focused service-learning program founded in 1993. Earth Force attempts to move young participants beyond service projects that generate "nice good feelings" and toward community improvement through sustainable change.

The Earth Force model draws on school and community resources to teach students the civic skills necessary to organize for community action and persuade local officials to make changes. Simultaneously, the program helps youth to reflect on their experiences. Projects have included bike trail safety and maintenance, water testing and cleaning and pollution reduction.

Donna Power, Earth Force's vice president of Research and Design, states that "we define ourselves as a youth-driven organization which recognizes that young people are a key voice, though not the sole voice, in decisions made about their projects and our organization." She adds, "We have gotten adults and young people to understand that traditional service-learning projects are a place to get folks interested, but it's a middle piece, not an end." Powers cites young people's ownership through their decisionmaking as the crucial component in fostering sustained involvement in civic engagement and social advocacy.

In addition, Earth Force has a youth advisory board in both its national office and all local branches. Two representatives from the youth advisory board sit in as voting members on the Board of Directors, and two former youth members were elected to the board as college students. Powers acknowledges that enabling youth to serve as voting board members further endorses the organizational message that young people are, and must be, an integral part of the policymaking process.

Challenges and Strategies for Success

Many adults see the need for meaningful youth engagement in organizational policymaking and decision-making. Young people clearly want and need more significant involvement in community building endeavors. Why is the process, then, often a difficult one?

The majority of challenges facing youth and adults alike are related to the relative newness of the concept. On a large scale, youth voice and decisionmaking are still in the experimental phase. Hesitation and fear of failure from both parties can make the implementation process tentative, poorly structured or indefinitely delayed.

Issues such as recruitment, logistics, buyin, and other concerns certainly surface and are important to resolve. Yet the root cause of many of the challenges faced by educators, community members, young people and others in implementing youth voice centers on the philosophy and commitment of those parties involved. Listed below are five challenges and suggested strategies for success.

1. Challenge: Not everyone shares the same definition of “youth voice.”

Strategies:

- Hold a program or organizationwide meeting with young people, adults, parents and others to discuss, develop consensus around and define “youth voice.”
- Explore with meeting participants examples of youth voice that exist already within the community and nationwide.
- Prominently feature the definition and role of youth voice in trainings, materials and the mission statement. Decide how it will be addressed among partners and with the community.
- Take it from the first step of talking about it and defining it to implementing it within the organization. Provide frequent opportunities for reflection and feedback among young people and adults.

2. Challenge: Adults and young people have preconceived notions about one another’s understanding of and capacity for a truly successful youth voice component.

Strategies:

- Map out the needs and assets of all youth and adult participants so that the scope and limitations of everyone involved is clearly outlined and understood.
- Establish ground rules that promote trust in the abilities and skills of one another, e.g., treating each person with respect, being open-minded, listening without interruption and sharing ideas and resources.
- View one another as assets, not as problems or obstacles.
- Provide and accept meaningful roles for one another.

3. Challenge: Not everyone in the organization buys into the concept or practice of youth voice or wants it incorporated into the organization’s structure.

Strategies:

- Start small. Gain support from a few key players to lay the foundation, and then utilize their endorsement for wider buy-in.
- Build support from all angles. Garnering support from the staff, local community members, school officials, parents and young people will lend a stronger argument for the case for youth voice.
- Provide ongoing training and support for all those who will be involved in the process.
- Carefully schedule adequate and realistic staff time for manning or overseeing the youth voice component.

4. Challenge: Youth voice often becomes merely the “tokenizing” of young people.

Strategies:

- Be extremely thoughtful about how and why the organization wants young people involved.
- Truly commit to listening to young people. Receive their recommendations and insights and give them equal consideration as those of adults.
- View young people as equal partners in significant and substantial ways right from the beginning. Asking for their contribution after decisions have been made or simply as a gesture will be unsuccessful and may damage the potential for a working relationship between adults and young people in the future.
- Trust that young people are not going to make “bad” decisions. By giving them parameters for decision-making, they will act as checks and balances with each other.
- Enable them to fail and to learn from their mistakes. Young people become valid resources to themselves and the community when this process naturally occurs, and is followed with reflection and additional opportunities for success. Providing the answers as a means to circumvent failure (and the time and resources that may be spent) thwarts the input and abilities of the young people involved and is detrimental over the long term.

5. Challenge: The teacher, educator or other adult has difficulty relinquishing decision-making responsibilities to young people.

Strategies:

- Encourage the adult to start from a point of personal comfort when giving young people the “power” to impact important decisions or initiatives.

- Have adults define an area of their work or role where they feel comfortable letting go. As they adjust to the shift in control and gain confidence in young people's skills, they can relinquish more of their reach.
- Provide ongoing support, peer mentoring or professional development for adults who will be working with young people in a youth decisionmaking capacity.

Youth Voice at the State Level

In Maine, a Learning In Deed state, eight high school students serve alongside 20 adults on the Learning Results Team, a state policy panel. The panel guides the integration of service-learning in the state's school districts.

Initially, only adults served on the panel. "I wanted to include young people from the beginning of our involvement with Learning In Deed," said Heidi McGinley, leader of the Learning Results Team. "However, I wasn't sure if the panel was ready. I did not want to do it unless the kids could be equal members." Instead, she waited until she had detailed conversations with panel members to discuss their willingness to incorporate youth.

The panel also sent out a survey to 150 people in the State Department of Education to understand their experiences, observations and concerns about working with youth on policy issues. The results astonished panel members. Only three of the respondents had experience with youth involvement, and none of it had been positive. McGinley also learned that all 12 school districts associated with Learning In Deed had previous – and unproductive – experience working with young people at the policymaking level. It was clear from these early investigations that neither the young people nor the adults who worked with them had been adequately prepared for or supported in their attempted collaborations.

McGinley and her colleagues carefully designed a training program for their new members. McGinley recruited young people from two high schools willing to let students miss one day of school per month and capable of handling the legal and financial liability of the involvement. Once students were selected, three adult leaders from the panel conducted a one-day training with them around their role. They repeatedly asked the students, "What can we do to make you more comfortable in your role on this panel?" The young people consistently replied, "Nothing. Don't treat us any differently."

The students and adults have agreed upon several practices that foster a sense of mutual respect and fruitful cooperation. They use ground rules that are the same for all panel members. They try to avoid assumptions about what young people can contribute and what they might need. Young people are given frequent access to McGinley, the panel leader, through phone, e-mail and personal meetings. The panel also breaks into small working groups that enable more frequent hands-on participation to create strong mentoring relationships between the adults and young people. The panel also uses a written feedback method at the end of every meeting to evaluate and assess the collaboration.

McGinley is pleased with the way the panel has taken shape since its incorporation of young people. She sees them not only having an active role in decisionmaking but assuming leadership roles as well. Panel members currently are planning state policy around the issue of schoolwide service-learning and next year will be speaking with state legislators about implementation.

Recommendations for Adults in Service-Learning Initiatives

Most service-learning initiatives would benefit from adding a youth voice component. Many program coordinators, however, stress the importance of preliminarily assessing whether the organization is truly interested in working with youth as equal partners; has the staffing, resources, and capability needed; and has a clear and agreed-upon understanding of the definition of "youth voice" and what it will look like within the organization.

The following additional recommendations were offered by program coordinators from Grand Junction High School, Earth Force, Shabazz High School, and Do Something's Community Connections Campaign. They include:

- Enjoy, respect and believe in young people without “tokenizing” them. View them as experts in their field. It is from this foundation that the most successful service-learning/youth voice programs thrive.
- Identify and make clear what is expected from the adults and young people involved in the program. Provide parameters and guidelines, as well as an assessment process that can be used on a regular basis as a measurement tool.
- Look to other organizations for examples, best practices and advice, but tailor the youth voice to meet the needs of your organization or program. Other models may be impressive and successful, but youth voice only works when it meets the needs of the organization at hand.
- Be creative and flexible. Be willing to make mistakes and share those with young people. Part of treating young people as equal partners is admitting that one individual may not have all the answers. Utilize the assets of young people by drawing from their unique perspective and experience.
- Offer and participate in ongoing professional development around the field of youth voice. Ask and field questions of young people. Develop an internal support system for young people and adults.
- Allow young people to fail and trust that they will find a workable approach, even though it may not be the “best” or the “quickest.” People learn by doing and take tremendous pride in accomplishing things that may have proved challenging at first. Overcoming obstacles and earning success are what foster and sustain an involvement in service or civic engagement.

Recommendations for Policymakers

It is important that those who influence policy around service-learning begin to recognize the crucial role youth voice plays in creating meaningful and sustainable youth involvement. As this paper has illustrated, young people are more inclined to become active contributors to society, now and in the future, if they are given the opportunity to influence the decisions that shape their lives.

Youth voice has yet to be widely adopted among service-learning programs. This may be a result of a lack of faith in its potential, limited awareness of its effects, hesitation to change the existing power structure and/or a shortage of credible training for adults who wish to begin implementing youth voice in their field of work. The following suggestions share the aim of bringing youth voice to the forefront of service-learning.

- Establish a clear and agreed-upon definition among officials of the parameters which shape the practice of “youth voice.” A common understanding is critical to ensuring that efforts to integrate youth voice within service-learning initiatives are practical and necessary.
- Establish a statewide task force that includes young people, parents, school-based administrators, community members and business people who have experience with the incorporation of youth voice within service-learning programs. The task force can assist policymakers with implementing statewide opportunities and can inform them of best practices, opportunities, support and evaluation as youth voice takes shape within programs and schools.
- Promote the infusion of youth on advisory councils, task forces, coalitions and boards. Encourage public and private agencies to work as partners with a diversity of young people.
- Create local training in school districts around the subject of implementing youth voice in service-learning. Invite young people, community members, business people and parents to participate in the training.

Organize a formal support network for training recipients, such as clusters or working groups, to ensure ongoing support as practitioners move forward within their district.

- Target specific, adequate funding and resources to support communities as they embrace youth voice within their schools and organizations. This often includes additional staff who possess prior experience working with young people in this capacity, as well as additional funding for training, space and materials.
- Promote and support collaborative efforts among schools, organizations and businesses, which will all need to adjust to the presence of youth voice within their field.
- Advocate publicly for the inclusion, and added benefits of, youth voice within service-learning initiatives. Recognize outstanding young people, educators, adults, schools, businesses and organizations on an ongoing basis.
- Encourage policymakers to share their own personal youth involvement experiences and how those experiences helped shape their future goals, aspirations and commitment to public life and serving the public good.

A State Policymaker's Perspective

In South Carolina, students recently addressed issues of service-learning and student involvement in policymaking before the State Board of Education.

The facilitator for the youth presentation was State Representative Bob Walker, chairman of the K-12 subcommittee of the House Education Committee. Representative Walker has been an outspoken advocate of service-learning and character education at all levels of education. He recently answered several questions about his role in promoting service-learning and youth voice.

Question: Why have you been so personally committed to the idea of service-learning?

Representative Walker: I believe the more you involve young people, the more you are able to bring them back to the educational process. So many of our young people have lost interest in school. Through service-learning, we give them the message that we care about what they have to say and they have an important role in our communities. Service-learning grabs their attention and keeps them involved in school.

I see service-learning as one of many spokes on the wheel that contributes to a good education. Service-learning, character education, alternative schools and other programs ... they all have to be in place to create a strong and viable public school system.

Question: What do you think is the unique contribution of service-learning?

Representative Walker: Every child is different. What may appeal to one child may be of no interest to another. That, I believe, is the reason for the great strength of service-learning ... it can allow all young people to find a place that suits their own interests and abilities. We've got to do everything we can to motivate our young people, and service-learning is one of the best ways to do that.

Question: What would you say to other state legislators about service-learning and youth voice?

Representative Walker: I would advise my colleagues, 'Be open and listen to young people. This doesn't mean that you will enact exactly what they want, but bring their ideas into your discussions.' For example, when the Education Committee was looking at issues of student accountability, I asked young people how they should be held accountable within their schools. Their input was certainly taken into consideration when making policy.

Legislators need to understand that service-learning is about improving the value of education for young people. We all know that the cost of education is much cheaper than the cost of prison. Since we've put service-learning into place in this state, the overall quality of education has improved. Service-learning is a very cost-effective approach in educating our youth and helping them to be productive citizens.

We as adults have got to realize that everything we do is ultimately for the sake of the future of our young people. If they aren't allowed to participate in shaping that future, it has serious consequences for all of us. We can't force them to participate; we have to win their approval. That's the key.

Recommendations for Young People

These suggestions come from young people who were interviewed for this paper, including voices from Activism 2000, Grand Junction High School, and Do Something.

- Don't wait! Young people have the ability to make a difference now. They have the right to advocate for participating in community and state decisionmaking processes, particularly when centered on issues that affect or are important to young people.
- Find others who are interested in advocating for youth voice and work together. Resources can be found online, in the newspaper and in your own community. Talk to local officials and adults who may be able to help inform and shape your interest.
- Speak up! Explore with your service-learning coordinator the roles young people can play within the program's design and management. Adults may think young participants are not interested in or capable of handling these areas. Discuss what responsibilities are available to young people and how you might orchestrate a shift in their control.
- Ask for training and support as you adopt a leadership role in the decisionmaking process. Don't be afraid to ask questions about policies and procedures you do not understand.
- Follow through, and hold yourself – and adults – accountable. Assuming an equal voice in leadership means assuming all the responsibilities that accompany the role.
- Develop an adequate and structured reflection process for yourself and those with whom you work. Scheduling this time provides an opportunity to discuss challenges, needs and successes.
- Document your involvement as a practitioner of "youth voice" using photos, video/audio, journals or other methods. One of the most common requests that service-learning organizations receive from young people is visual presentations that show other young people in action. Additionally, documentation enables participants to see their success and learn from challenges. Documentation is also a great way to receive recognition for your work and to recruit other young people to participate.

Conclusion

The task of integrating youth voice in service-learning requires a shift in perception about adult/youth relationships from all involved. All participants may have to step outside their comfort zone as roles and responsibilities are redistributed among young people and adults. Truly recognizing youth as equal voices at the table – in decisionmaking roles, as trainers, as leaders – is a process that stands to greatly reshape legislation, education and communities.

Research has shown that young people are eager to become key players in service-learning and society at large. The integration of youth voice within service-learning provides a natural means by which young people can assume leadership roles while gaining valuable skills they need to become lifelong, active citizens. In

return, organizations gain the energy, perspective, commitment and skills of the young people whom they involve. Studies also document a sustained involvement in service-learning and a greater willingness to recruit peers among young participants who are given a meaningful voice. In an era of declining civic engagement among America's future leaders, this connection between present service and future citizenship is crucial.

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Organizations

Activism 2000

www.youthactivism.com

800-KID-POWER

American Institute for Public Service

www.aips.org

302-622-9101

Campus Outreach Opportunity League – COOL

www.cool2serve.org

202-265-1200 x108

Chenoweth Elementary School

Email: sblakely@chenoweth.k12.or.us

541-296-9127

Close-Up Foundation

www.closeup.org

800-CLOSE-UP

Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth

www.colemanadvocates.org

800-4-AYOUTH

Compact for Learning and Citizenship

Education Commission of the States

www.ecs.org/clc

303-299-3644

Constitutional Rights Foundation

www.crf-usa.org

213-487-5590

Corporation for National Service

www.cns.gov

202-606-5000

Do Something, Inc.

coach.dosomething.org (educators)

www.dosomething.org (young people)

212-523-1175

Earth Force

www.earthforce.org

703-519-6865

Education Week

www.edweek.org

301-280-3100

4-H Council

www.fourhcouncil.edu/cyd

301-961-2961

Free the Children

www.freethechildren.org

905-881-0863

Fresh Youth Initiatives

www.freshyouth.org

212-781-1151

Grand Junction High School

Email: servlern@gihs.mesa.k12.co.us

970-242-7496

Hubert Kindergarten Center

Email: lorbin@hudson.k12.ma.us

978-567-6130

Learning In Deed

www.learningindeed.org

202-778-1040

Malcolm Shabazz City High School

www.madison.k-12.wi.us/shabazz

608-246-5040

Michigan Community Foundations Youth Project

www.mcfyp.org

616-842-7080

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse

www.nicsl.coled.umn.edu

800-808-SERV

National Youth Leadership Council

www.nylc.org

651-631-3672

Points of Light Foundation

www.pointsoflight.org

Youth Service America

www.ysa.org or www.SERVE.net

202-296-2992

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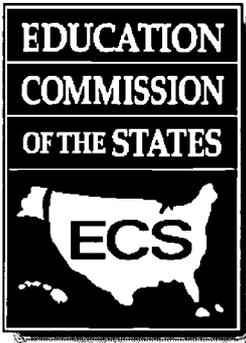
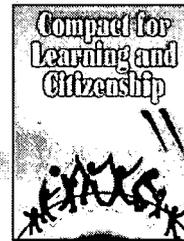
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