

Reclaiming the Common Good in Education: Teaching Social Responsibility Through Service Learning

Prentice T. Chandler, Ph.D.

Kathy Buck, Ph.D.

Debra Ferguson, Ed.D.

Athens State University

This article provides an overview of the use of service learning in the middle schools as a way to instill and foster civic responsibility and citizenship in students. In addition to a discussion about service learning's major aspects, the authors provide concrete examples of how to implement service learning across the curriculum in middle school settings.

Where Has Social Responsibility Gone?

The mind is not individual but social, and learning is a by-product of social activities.

—John Dewey

The idea of teaching social responsibility in schools is not new. From the beginnings of modern education in America some have believed that a primary mission in the school curricula was to train or educate effective citizens (Ross, 2006). The strength of this idea in the American curriculum is one that ultimately depends on the political climate of the day, and usually finds itself expressed most clearly in the social studies curriculum (Stanley & Nelson, 1994). In today's educational political climate, with an overemphasis on standardization and testing, subjects like social studies are often relegated to a second tier of courses, situated firmly behind math, science, and reading. In fact some elementary schools have characterized the social studies as a subject that will be taught "if and when" the more important subjects are covered, in effect, squeezing the social studies out of existence (Zarrillo, 2008). In secondary settings, social studies often falls prey to the same type of logic. Instead of being conceptualized as a subject whose main mission is to train effective citizens, social studies is characterized by memorization of dates, facts, and historical personalities (Loewen, 2007), training our future citizens not in how to make the world a better place, but rather how to memorize facts and give them back on an exam.

Many social studies educators and education professionals decry what they claim is a crisis of democracy in America (Steinberg, 2000). With the changes that we face in the 21st century—war, terrorism, shifting demographics, an unstable economy, poverty, global

warming, shifts in political power on the international stage—the question begs to be asked: How *best* to educate our students for participation in our unique American democracy? The structure of social studies curriculum, as it currently exists, actually dates to a committee that met in 1916 to determine what subjects should be taught in secondary schools. The course offerings and subjects that were born at this 1916 meeting is the same scheme that we use today when we organize our social studies content (Evans, 2004). This fact begs another question that looms large when training our students for participation in democracy: With all of the changes that have occurred in the world since 1916, shouldn't the way we teach social studies also change? Social studies knowledge, as it is conceptualized in schools, does not adequately address the topic of social responsibility or social justice (Lisman, 1998). In fact, the erosion of interest in public service as a part of the school curricula may endanger the meaning and the concept of democracy in America and also the foundation of civil society (Dekker & Halman, 2003).

Using Service Learning to Teach Social Responsibility

A better way to teach our students to be effective, caring, and responsible citizens is by doing social studies (Danker, 2005) as opposed to passively listening to a teacher "talk" about social studies. The program is called service learning. Service learning is a form of experiential learning and teaching that achieves academic objectives while meeting needs that students identify in the community or school setting (Watkins & Braun, 2005). Service learning is "a method by which young people learn and develop through active

participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences” that

- Meet community needs
- Are coordinated in collaboration with school and community
- Are integrated into each student’s academic curriculum
- Provide young people with opportunities to use newly acquired academic skills in real life situations in their own communities
- Enhance what is taught in the classroom
- Help foster a sense of caring for others (Fertman, White, & White, 1996, p. 4).

Service learning requires the student to be active rather than passive, produce knowledge rather than simply consuming it, shape their communities, leading toward a more just social order (Fertman, White, & White, 1996). Through active participation in society and learning how to be dynamically involved in addressing and solving social problems, the overall school curriculum (not just the social studies curriculum) can be infused with practical citizenship education and social responsibility.

Components of Service Learning

At first glance, service learning may seem very similar to volunteer work. Fertman, White, and White (1996), outline the elements of service learning as 1) preparation, 2) service, 3) reflection, and celebration. Let’s examine each of these elements more closely.

Preparation: In this stage, the teacher links the services that the students are to perform to the existing curriculum and other learning outcomes. This preliminary stage is also where students and teachers develop a clear idea of what they hope to accomplish.

Service: In this stage the actual service is performed. The service could be direct service characterized by personal contact with people in need (i.e. working in homeless shelters), indirect service characterized by facilitating resources to a needs area (i.e. fund raising), or civic action characterized by informing the public about an issue (i.e. recycling program) and working toward solving the problem.

Reflection: This element distinguishes service learning from volunteerism and connects the action to the existing curriculum. “Reflection means asking basic questions of oneself, such as: What am I doing? Why am I doing it? What am I learning?” (p. 33). These reflections need to be structured, connected to the academic course of study, and an organic and process-oriented exercise.

Celebration: In this culminating stage, students celebrate their interaction and learning with the community. The celebration of change or impact in the community is a two-way street: students learn to care for and engage with their community, and the community benefits from the fact that students see themselves as agents of change in their respective communities: both are goals of any education system that prides itself on educating effective citizens.

Examples of Service Learning

In their book, *Enriching the Curriculum Through Service Learning*, Kinsley and McPherson (1995) give a glimpse of the *kinds* of activities students may engage in through service learning:

- Civics students help local immigrants pass their citizenship exams
- Students build a wheelchair for an 18-month-old child with multiple sclerosis
- Elementary students create their own books and give them to mothers in the community to encourage parents to read to their children
- Learning about local history by interviewing elderly people in the community
- Vocational students create a health center to serve students’ health needs
- Students provide assistance with technology to teachers and members of the community (p. 2)

The beauty of service learning is that there are no limits to how teachers, at all levels, can implement these ideas into their classes. Your service learning projects can range from simple, such as implementing a recycling program at your school, to more complex projects like helping to feed the homeless in your community. Research in social psychology (Aronson, 2004) suggests that people learn much more from interacting with people in social situations than just having someone simply tell them about a person or social problem. If you want your students to learn what it means to be a good citizen, have them actually do something that a good citizen would do, rather than just telling about it.

Middle Schools and Service Learning in Action

Diane Galaton (1996) reported that when Central Bucks School District, Pennsylvania, converted junior high schools to middle schools, one benefit was the development of interrelated academic teams of students and teachers, allowing for instruction across content areas in an interrelated manner. The principals

of two of the middle schools were also determined to use this innovative instructional model to increase community involvement of teachers and students. As an initial step, Thomas Roberts of Lenape Middle School and Louis White of Holicong Middle School pooled some resources and hired Galatan as a facilitator, providing a consistent link between the schools and the community.

Working with the existing school advisory groups of faculty and administrators who solicited student participation in a volunteer corps, Galatan contacted community agencies to connect each student volunteer with an appropriate volunteer opportunity. That initial project was less than optimal, with only 20 students initially volunteering, and fewer than that actually completing their volunteer projects. Follow-up with agency personnel and with students led to the conclusion that a more organized and structured approach was needed with students of this age range (Galatan, 1996).

The solutions to organization and structure came via service-learning projects involving “academic teams.” The schools began on a small scale with one academic team at each school committing to a service-learning project. The seventh-grade team at Holicong partnered with a shelter for abused women and their children. The 110 students were divided into six advisory groups supervised by one teacher. Activities began with training at the school provided by the director of the shelter. The students learned about violence in society and domestic violence, and about the impact of domestic violence on families. After the training, students met to discuss the training, and make decisions regarding the service to be provided. These seventh graders elected to conduct a community drive for goods and services needed at the shelter, and to adopt one or more rooms at the shelter to repaint and refurbish. The drive began with a letter-writing campaign, and many goods were collected. The students also wrote letters soliciting support for state legislation related to allocation of funds to support victims of domestic violence. A team of students accompanied by two adults volunteered on a weekend to work on refurbishing the room at the shelter. At Lenape Middle School, the eighth-grade team of more than 100 students developed a project for improving two community parks. Students traveled to the parks to work for one school day (Galatan, 1996).

After the first year of implementation, it was evident that this team approach to service-learning far exceeded the initial individual-focused projects. Year two of the team approach led to seven projects between the two schools.

The advisory teams focused this year on connecting the service projects to the classroom curricula. For example, a ninth-grade English/social studies team partnered with a local women’s group to plan and hold a Victorian type fair to celebrate the group’s centennial year. This project was well-aligned with the period of American history and literature the ninth graders would be studying that spring (Galatan, 1996).

The seventh grade class continued to work with the shelter for abused women and their children. The students wrote children’s story books for the children at the shelter as a part of their English curriculum, and integrated the books into story and play hour at the shelter. Each week a small group of seventh graders, accompanied by an adult, visited the shelter to help the children. They read and engaged them in crafts and other activities (Galatan, 1996). Holicong and Lenape continue to make service-learning a part of their curricula. The initiative of these two middle school principals, and the determination of the faculty and staff have also influenced other schools to become involved. High school students also participate through culminating senior projects (Central Bucks School District, 2008).

In 2002 at McGee School in New Orleans, 131 students in grades five through eight participated in at least one service-learning project. The projects were integrated into learning activities across the curriculum. Fifth-grade students participated in a paper recycling project (science class) and wrote poetry on recycled paper (English class). Sixth-grade students read and wrote with second-grade students to assist in literacy improvement. Seventh-grade students spent time with senior citizens living in a nearby home for seniors. They engaged in activities with the seniors and studied the physical effects of aging in science class, related historical events to residents’ lives in history class, and studied the demographics of aging in math class. Eighth-graders focused on environmental issues including monitoring water quality in the Mississippi River and maintaining a butterfly garden of native edible plants (Corporation for National and Community Service Resource Center, 2008).

Service as an Integral Part of Schooling

Service learning as outlined above has its roots in several areas of education that lead to and directly support many of the implied goals of American education. Service learning has its roots in citizenship

education, youth development, and John Dewey's idea of experiential learning. From a civics education perspective (Wade, 2008), service learning helps students to understand the way their community is organized and governed, showing them how their actions can make a difference in the interest of the public good. In this, youth develop a sense and obligation to help others, the cornerstone of social responsibility. From youth development perspective, self-esteem, personal sense of competence, moral development, and taking responsibility for one's own actions are enhanced with service learning (Kinsley & McPherson, 1995). Dewey "believed that all curriculum must be generated out of social situations based on organized principles but founded on the twin pillars of the capacity of the child and the demands of the environment" (Kinsley & McPherson, 1995, p. 4).

If active citizenship training is to take place in schools, then the lines of what are traditionally accepted for social studies need to be redrawn (Ross, 2000) and broadened (Eisner, 2003). Ironically, social studies research tells us that social studies is often the least "social" of the classes that our students take. Since teaching social responsibility has always been a strand of educational thought, "The wheel doesn't need to be reinvented; it is at hand and only needs to be rolled more intentionally...towards citizenship" (Parker, 2005, p. 346). The idea of social betterment by serving one's fellow humans (Hursh & Ross, 2000) need not be the exclusive domain of the social studies. *Indeed, democratic schooling* (Apple & Beane, 1995; Parker, 1991) and *service learning could be the heart of the curriculum*. The ideas outlined above are not better suited to one subject area than to another; it is the role of all teachers, at all levels to help in the goal of training effective citizens for our unique American democracy. In fact, instead of an over reliance on standards and testing to evaluate schools, service learning might be a better way to measure how schools are doing: What have we done for our community lately? Much work is needed, and service learning is a step in the right direction.

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