

Learning by Doing: Service Learning As a Means of Personal Growth in the Middle Grades

Katherine A. Farber

Does service learning impact the personal growth of middle grades students in grades 4-8? If so, in what ways? A review of the literature indicates that it does, in terms of the development of empathy, responsibility, civic engagement, and self-efficacy. In addition, findings include growth in students' communication with parents and teachers. In this literature review the developmental match between service learning and early adolescence is analyzed, as well the research on personal growth and service learning among K-16 populations. In addition, the issues of reducing bias, possible pitfalls of service learning in relation to personal development, and a measurement tool for future studies are shared. Findings include the importance of reflection, project duration, and mutual understanding between those served and participants of service learning. With these components in place, service learning can lead to significant personal growth in students, especially middle level learners.

The middle school years are challenging for many students (Simmons & Bluth, 1987). Issues such as a lack of self-confidence, social problems such as bullying, and disengagement increase during early adolescents are pervasive (Goldring & Rosen, 2004). How do school environments, pedagogy, and curricular practices impact these learners? What follows is a review of the literature about early adolescence and one pedagogical practice that can benefit early adolescent students in several ways.

Service learning is a teaching and learned tool that shows promise in engaging, motivating, and empowering early adolescents. This literature review explores how service learning can benefit a middle level student's personal development. This literature review will explore the research about the impact of service learning on middle level learners and how factors such as curriculum, bias, and student grade level effect this personal growth.

Service learning is an approach that features students exploring problems in their school or community, and developing plans to solve them. According to Kids Involved Doing Service Learning consortium (KIDS), a non-profit organization devoted to increasing service learning opportunities for students, service learning is when students find problems and needs in their school; explore and discover the causes and effects of the problems they identify; research and identify various solutions to the problems; evaluate solutions and decide on the actions to take; create an action plan and time-line to implement ideas; implement the plan; and evaluate the results (2013).

Service learning will be referred to in this literature review as the following: personal development, for the purposes of this study, are issues pertaining to an adolescent's self-confidence,

happiness, self-efficacy, perceptions of belonging, sense of civic engagement, and open-mindedness. In addition, personal development in this review refers the concepts of tolerance, biases and stereotypes (Aubrey, 2010).

This literature review is organized into the following sections: (a) the developmental match between service learning and early adolescents, (b) personal growth as a result of service learning, (c) service learning as a tool for fighting bias, (e) curriculum considerations, and (f) service learning pitfalls.

Developmental Match: Middle School and Service Learning

Adolescence, particularly early adolescence, is a period of massive transition for students. From body changes, social dynamics and shifting friendships, to transitioning from elementary school to middle school, this timeline is marked with massive and frequent change. During adolescent growth, researchers note a decline in engagement, parental communication, motivation and achievement (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & Iver, 1993). Early adolescents' needs for schooling are also changing and developing. Research shows that early adolescents prefer to learn through peer interactions, active learning, and connecting with the community (Payne, & Edwards, 2010). In other words, adolescents developmentally crave a Vygotskian approach to education, based on learning through social interaction as a way of developing meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). As mentioned earlier, this is often not present in traditional junior high or middle school models. This section will explore how service learning is a teaching tool that developmentally

matches the needs of the early adolescent students and provide opportunities for enriched personal growth.

The Importance of Ninth Grade

Researchers have highlighted the importance of ninth grade in predicting a student's chance of graduating from high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Student success, according to researchers, is directly linked to success in grade nine. Researchers have also explored how service learning in the ninth grade yielded a strong correlation between student engagement and high school graduation. During a K-12 School Based Learn and Serve Grant in two high needs schools in Illinois over a three year period, several service learning initiatives for ninth graders were developed (Sims, 2010). During these initiatives, researchers found many benefits, including increased social engagement, levels of civic responsibility, leadership development, and personal growth. Specifically in terms of personal growth, teachers reported an increase in maturity and self-efficacy in students who participated in this project (Sims, 2010).

During the critical year of ninth grade, it is essential that students experience academic and personal success to increase chances of graduating from high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Ninth grade serves as a transition from middle school to high school. In the above service learning project, new ninth grade students were aiding younger students transitioning to middle school as part of the service learning project. This held reciprocal benefits for both parties (Sims, 2010). In other words, both the new middle school students and new high school students benefitted from participation in this service learning project. Ninth grade service learning projects are linked to greater academic success in ninth grade, which then increases graduation rates (Sims, 2010). In summation, ninth grade is a critical year for students to find academic success, and research suggests that service learning is one tool for students to achieve academically and grow personally. Next, research about middle grade (sixth, seventh and eighth grades) students', engagement, and high school rates is explored.

Middle School, Dropping Out, and Engagement.

The middle grades are also critically important in terms of student engagement and high school graduation rates. When students do not achieve academic success during the sixth grade, research shows they had poor attendance and a 10-20 % chance of graduating high school on time (Payne, & Edwards, 2010). One of the primary reasons students dropped out was uninteresting classes (Farber, 2010). Middle level students are unique in their pedagogical, socio-emotional, and personal needs, so relevant, authentic, and social learning experiences are needed to engage these learners (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & Iver, 1993). According to the National Middle Level Association, "With young adolescents, achieving academic success is highly dependent on their other developmental needs

being met" (National Middle School Association, 2003, p.3). In other words, middle school students' cognitive, emotional, social and physical needs were intertwined and impacted their engagement and motivation in school. According to Payne and Edward (2010), service learning is a way to re-engage learners in school and put them on a path to successfully graduating from high school.

Middle School Service Learning

Limited research was available for middle school/level service learning. Researchers determined that less than 9% of service learning projects are designed and implemented for middle school students (Richards, Cornelli, Sanderson, Celio, Grant, Choi, George, & Deane, 2013). Researchers also made the developmental case for involving early adolescent students in service learning and pointed out several benefits of doing so (Billig, 2011).

One study of middle school service learning and academic success compared three schools including a population of 1,153 sixth through eighth grade students (Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000). Researchers analyzed several features linking the development of adolescents to service learning. This study tested social responsibility, personal development, parental involvement, and engagement with school, perceived scholastic competence, responsibility, academic success, conduct, and mastery of goals. Key findings include increased personal growth in groups that participated in longer durations of service learning projects, and those who did a great deal of reflective work (Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000). Students also reported that participating in service learning encouraged them to become interested in other classes.

Sixth grade females. The largest positive impact (including parental communication and responsibility) on the middle school students was reported within the sixth grade female population (Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000). These results connected to other research that demonstrated how service learning is impactful on middle school females (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & Iver, 1993). In that research, early developing females in grade six showed the most growth and benefits from service learning. Often this group has particular social challenges, such as more difficulty with identity, and decreased teacher communication (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & Iver, 1993). Assisting these students with the transition from elementary school to middle school, and childhood into adolescence could have long-term positive results (Alsbaugh, 1998).

Parental communication. Parental communication (between the child and parent) about school declines in the middle school years (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Communication between adolescents and their parents is important because involvement in school helps improve student academic success (Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000). Middle level students had

increased levels of parental communication after participating in service learning projects. Therefore, service learning projects at the middle level increase communication between students and parents, which in turn increase student achievement (Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000).

Sixth grade impacts. Research revealed that sixth graders had the most increases in positive outcomes both personally and academically from their participation in service learning (Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000). The authors cautioned that this could be for several reasons other than their age and grade level, including the quality of the projects and gender norms and expectations. Researchers call for more research to be done to see which middle grade, if any, yielded the most positive outcomes from service learning. This is preliminary evidence that service learning is very impactful in the early middle grades, especially grade six (Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000).

This section provided a wide range of studies that support the use of service learning for many positive student outcomes including leadership skills, increased engagement and lessening of dropping out, increased parental communication, and increased self-efficacy. In addition, the research points to a developmental match between the needs of early adolescents and the type of learning and experiences service learning provides.

Personal Growth in Middle Level Students

Personal growth can take many forms. There is not a universally accepted definition of personal growth, but in the context of early adolescents, scholar-practitioners can look for growth in empathy, perspective taking, leadership, interpersonal skills, reduced bias, increased confidence and connections with others (National Middle School Association, 2003).

Reducing entitlement. The idea of limiting entitlement fits nicely into the concept of personal growth and development. In a study about college students, the researchers present a connection between service learning and self-entitlement (Hoffman, & Wallach, 2007). They explore how colleges can reduce self-entitlement in students through participation in service learning programs. Entitlement in this study was framed in terms of increasing personal responsibility and self-determination that leads to the betterment of society. In other words, researchers note self-entitlement, or avoiding responsibility and having limited self-determination, as challenges for college students and as a challenge for future involvement in society and democracy (Hoffman, & Wallach, 2007). Key findings include college student participation in community service increases students' perceptions of the importance of volunteer work and significantly decreases self-entitlement attitudes. In a report about engagement and the purpose of the liberal arts in higher education, Hoffman, and Wallach (2007) noted:

We believed that by engaging students, by involving them in demanding service-learning and community-based research expe-

riences, the academy could force them to consider their own privilege; challenge their assumptions of entitlement and self-indulgence; help them recognize that learning has implications for action and use; help them develop skills and habits of resiliency; and make them aware of their responsibilities to the larger community (p.6).

This is the case with service learning and entitlement (Hoffman, & Wallach, 2007) because outcomes include a shift in perception, from entitlement (blaming, expecting things to be done for you) to being responsible for one's own actions.

Spirituality and life happiness. Further exploration of personal growth and service learning found connections to spirituality and life happiness. Louie-Badua and Wolf (2008) present the idea that service learning increases students' spirituality. It is important to note that the authors define spirituality not as religious per se, but as "one's subjective awareness and internal values, with the ability to explore the meaning and purpose of our lives" (Louie-badua & Wolf, 2008, p. 91). They focus on three dimensions of service learning: interconnectedness; opening the heart to those around you, or removing "otherness;" and reflection that explores one's background, values, purpose and meaning. These dimensions bring can bring lifetime commitment to serve others (Louie-Badua & Wolf, 2008, p. 91).

This value and meaning also connects to studies of life happiness. Research on the effects of happiness and adult motivation has been widely studied, but little is known about life satisfaction and happiness effecting education in K-12 students. In a study by Lewis, Huebner, Malone, and Valois (2011), focused on how life satisfaction impacted student engagement in adolescents. When considering student engagement, personal factors such as a student's emotional health and life satisfaction are important considerations. This is true especially in adolescence stages, when academic performance sags (Forrest, Bevans, Riley, Crespo, Louis, 2013). Researchers found that middle school students who reported they were content with their lives at the beginning of the school year were more likely to engage in their academic career despite their race, gender, socio-economic status, grade point average, and family status. This finding connects to Fredrickson's (2001) *Broaden and Build Theory of Positive Emotions*. Fredrickson postulates that students with higher life satisfaction are more successful in school. Researchers in the areas of life happiness and spirituality encourage school professionals to seek, monitor, and improve cognitive engagement and life satisfaction in students (Louie-Badua & Wolf, 2008; Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011). Next, the benefits of service learning for all parties involved are explored.

Reciprocal benefits of service learning. Reciprocity in service learning has been noted by researchers (Jacoby, 1996; Vogel & Seifer, 2011). According to Vogel and Seifer, "Community and university partners – including faculty members, students and community organizations – are engaged as co-learners and co-

creators of knowledge” (2011, p. 186). In other words, all parties involved in service learning benefit from the experience. In one study researchers analyzed the outcomes of a service learning project involving college freshman and elementary school students. They found reciprocal benefits for both the college and the elementary students. The findings reveal that college students who participated in service learning expressed gains in self-esteem, coping strategies, and they volunteered more in their communities (Eppler, Ironsmith, Dingle, & Erickson, 2011). According to the study, elementary students showed gains in their reading scores. Service learning projects designed around mentoring younger students can yield positive results for both parties, thus providing evidence that in-school leadership service learning can be just as valuable as service learning in the community (Eppler, Ironsmith, Dingle, & Erickson, 2011).

Positive relationships. Another aspect of personal growth is increased positive relationships with others. Carlisle (2011) focused on students who built positive relationships with teachers, other students and school staff in service learning experiences. Researchers recognize that adolescence is a period when students tend to disregard adult role models and focus on their peers instead (Carlisle, 2011; Becker & Luthar, 2002). Problems that middle school students face include bullying, teasing and exclusion (Goldenring & Rosen, 2004). These happen primarily during unstructured times such as locker and lunch breaks. Researchers have studied how developing healthy relationships between teachers, schools staff and students, through participation in service learning projects, can combat some of these problems. Key findings include improvements in student behavior in terms of lessening bullying and office referrals, and an increase in students expressing a need for healthy relationships (Carlisle, 2011).

Student engagement. Student engagement has been mentioned in this literature review as it relates to school attendance and graduation, but it is worthy of further exploration as it relates to service learning. Educational researchers have studied various ways to define, categorize and label student engagement. Some of these are shared in this literature review, as a starting point in seeking connections between student engagement and service learning.

According to Lewis, Huebner, Malone, and Valois (2011) student engagement is thought of as “a student’s degree of active involvement in school through his or her thoughts, feelings, and actions” (p. 251). Maslow (1954) recognized that the emotional needs of individuals have to be met before any other educational goals. Each day, students arrive in classrooms with varying degrees of availability for learning, engagement and personal development. Students’ cognitive engagement, especially in early adolescence, is linked to their socio-emotional needs (National Middle School Association, 2003).

When considering student engagement, Newmann stated, “Engagement is difficult to define operationally, but we know it

when we see it, and we know it when it is missing” (Newmann, 1986, p. 242). In a comprehensive review about the definition of student engagement, Zyngier (2008) revealed that it was mentioned in many studies and articles, but rarely defined. Many researchers have based their definitions on three distinct components of student engagement: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards, & Zyngier, 2004; Smith, L. Butler-Kisber, L. LaRoque, J. Portelli, C. Shields, C. & Sparkes, 2001). Cognitive engagement focuses on the achievement linked academic goals and participation within classrooms. Emotional involves the feeling aspects of learning, discussion, and self-perception. Behavioral engagement is considered as positive classroom behaviors that support learning. These categories provide a solid framework for discussing engagement, but do not share the whole picture. According to Zyngier’s (2008), another researcher attempted to combine these realms into a participation/identification model, which equates engagement with academic success, based primarily on the individual, not considering gender, socio-economic status, class and ethnic factors. Indeed, there are varying research opinions about whether engagement is even linked to academic success.

Similarly, Newmann isolated factors that constitute engagement in the following way, “(i) school membership (clarity of purpose, fairness, personal support, success and caring) and (ii) authentic work (extrinsic rewards, intrinsic interests, sense of ownership, connection to real world and fun” (Newmann, 1992, p.18). Zyngier (2008) noted recent research points to inclusive classroom environments, with greater parental involvement, and student empowerment in curriculum leads to increases in the above listed factors. Additionally, he argued that student engagement must not be viewed in isolation, but must include school, teacher, and cultural contexts.

The above mentioned contexts for learning (school, teacher, culture) are also very important in building strong service learning environments. Student leadership, voice and community involvement is linked to increased engagement, and these are fundamental aspects of service learning (Billig, 2011). Newman’s concepts of school belonging and authentic work are linked directly to service learning. By involving students in all aspects of school and community functioning and building an inclusive community, this research on engagement supports a direct connection to the authentic, place based work of service learning.

Bias

Analyzing one’s assumptions, biases and stereotypes can help with personal development. This is important educational work for the classroom. Researchers believe that prejudices and stereotypes begin during the toddler years (Teaching Tolerance, 2014). These develop throughout childhood unless disrupted by individuals or experiences. Even biases that are thought to be extinguished can linger unless directly addressed. According to Gorski (2008), “Parents, teachers, faith leaders and other community

leaders can help children question their values and beliefs and point out subtle stereotypes used by peers and in the media. Children should also be surrounded by cues that equality matters” (p. 36). Just how might service learning challenge bias that might exist or be developing in a middle level learner?

Preservice teachers, bias, and service learning. This literature review will explore bias in terms of teachers, because it provides a window into how service learning can challenge existing biases. One study focused on pre-service teachers who completed service learning projects with urban high school students. Researchers found that many of these pre-service teachers had stereotypical preconceived notions about urban, mostly minority youth (Conner, 2010). By working with this population through service learning, pre-service teacher’s biases are “unlearned.” In other words, preservice teachers dispelled their own assumptions about urban youth based on direct interaction with them through service learning (Conner, 2010). Service learning opportunities must be complemented by student voice and reflection in order to bring about these changes. In addition, researchers found that the service learning program must be well planned, high quality, and involve reflection and connections in the classroom to be impactful. If the experience is not of high quality and does not include those tenants, then attitudes can remain unchanged or even become more negative (Erickson, 2009). Conner’s study (2010) features Contact theory, which shares five necessary conditions for attitude change (Allport, 1954). These conditions include equal opportunities for contact; shared and common goals; group cooperation; support of customs; cultures or law; and sustained contact (Allport, 1954). When these are present, researchers conclude, biases can be disrupted (Dovidio, Glick, & Rudman, 2005). In addition, the study also uses the theory of unlearning (Kohl, 1994). This theory helps preservice teachers analyze their own preconceptions and language to see if it marginalizes oppressed populations. Both of these theories help provide insight about how biases can be challenged or unlearned through service learning experiences.

The service learning outlined in Connor’s study (2010) will have ramifications for thousands of students because their teachers will now begin their careers with fewer biases, stereotypes, and preconceived notions about students from differing backgrounds. The research reflects the theme emerging in this review of the literature, unlearning bias.

Disrupting age bias in elementary students. A case study was presented of a class of fourth grade elementary students who visited a residential facility for the elderly as part of a long term service learning project. Through repeated interactions, shared experiences, and reflection before, during and after the experience, the students’ perceptions of the elderly were transformed. The students reduced or eliminated biases about the elderly, developed a better understanding of elderly people, learned problem solving skills and developed a sense of satisfaction from their work (Fair, Davis, & Fischer, 2011). In other words, students

began their service learning experience with biases and assumptions about the elderly. Researchers noted a marked change in these perceptions during and after the service learning experience (Fair, Davis, & Fischer, 2011). This provides more evidence that service learning can help elementary and college student unlearn biases.

While there is a great need for more research in this area, studies indicate that service learning can be a tool to help students participate in an experience that can change their thinking about others (Billig, 2011). As far as personal development is concerned, reducing bias in schools can yield significant benefits for the school community and beyond. School violence, bullying, and exclusion usually have roots in biases, assumptions and stereotypes (Partners Against Hate, 2014). Therefore, it is critical that educators explore meaningful ways to disrupt bias and provide repeated opportunities where students can broaden their thinking.

Curriculum Integration Considerations

Throughout this literature review, the author has used words such as “well developed” “carefully planned” and “thoughtfully designed” to describe service learning programs. Themes of reflection have surfaced through the research, but there is much more to service learning than reflection. The following section will highlight the features of high quality service learning projects.

Aspects of High Quality Service Learning Experiences

Billig’s (2011) article, *Making the most of your time: Implementing the K-12 service-learning standards for quality practice*, highlighted six components that create high quality service learning programs. These components include investigation, planning, action, reflection, demonstration, and celebration. Research about service learning demonstrates that these components (or similar ones) are needed for service learning projects to be effective and yield positive results (Billig, 2011; Farber, 2010; Anderson & Hill, 2001). Billig (2011), shared several standards for high quality service learning that include the indicators in Table 1. *See Table 1, page 6.*

Educators seeking the positive results of service learning can use the components and the indicators of quality to shape their projects to have the most impact.

Service learning integration examples. Public schools have integrated service learning into academic subjects in a way that develops personal growth in students. Next, this literature review will explore several examples of service learning projects that were integrated into existing curriculum and studied by researchers for their outcomes.

Literacy integration. Martin and Smolen (2010) described how service learning can be a vital part of a literature unit that promotes citizenship education and social justice. In a literature unit highlighting the social justice struggles of the Irish potato famine, students learned about the issue of hunger from personal narratives in historical fiction. Students then continued this exploration by researching hunger at the local and international level. During

Table 1*Standards and Indicators of Quality (Billig, 2011)*

Standard	Indicators of Quality
Duration and Intensity	Service learning projects have a long enough duration to participate in all the components, and to meet community needs and project goals—usually several weeks or months.
Meaningful Service	Projects are age-appropriate and personally relevant. Process leads to attainable goals and increased understanding of societal issues.
Links directly to curriculum and learning content	Projects have clearly articulated goals, are aligned with the curriculum, connect to other learning, and are supported by school boards.
Reflection	Service learning experience has regular reflection opportunities that promote in-depth thinking about society, self, and service.
Diversity	Helps students develop multiple perspectives, conflict resolution skills, the ability to overcome stereotypes, and to understand diverse backgrounds.

a service learning project, students developed ways to help those impacted by hunger through a social justice and historical lens. This allowed students to connect more deeply to the issue versus simply considering it an act of charity that impacts only “others.” In this case, students developed a greater understanding of hunger and social justice through an interdisciplinary learning process that included service learning. This type of project builds empathy and understanding about complex social issues (Martin and Smolen, 2010).

Culturally responsive and community integrated projects. Dewey’s sentiments that education is not preparation for life, but it is life itself could not be more clear than when students are involved in relevant community action that directly impacts where they live (Dewey & Small, 1897). Another example of service learning integration is a dramatic scene where a middle school student passionately implores a Natural Resources Committee to preserve a Cherokee heritage site as a state park (Terry & Panter, 2010). She explains that officials shouldn’t oppress the Cherokee again by a lack of action. The scene begins a case study of a National Learn and Serve grant service learning project administered in a southern, suburban middle school in a gifted program. The project takes a different approach, featuring *The Bernstein Artful Learning Model*, which is an “arts based school improvement model” (Terry & Panter, 2010, p.157) that was inspired by the composer Leonard Bernstein. This method is focused on the exploration of masterworks for teaching and learning. The four elements include experience, inquiry, creativity and reflection, which are similar to the components listed by Billig (2011). The key findings from this study included significant gains in self-

efficacy and altruism in students. The children who learned historical content using service learning found they could make a real difference in an issue in their own communities. Students in this study developed greater levels of altruism, or “feelings and behavior that show a desire to help other people and a lack of selfishness” (Merriam-Webster, 2014).

Collaboration with school staff. Another idea for integration of service learning to promote personal growth is the involvement of guidance counselors in the planning, delivery, and coordination of projects. One study focused on service learning classes taught by school counselors at the middle school level. Researchers found student growth in several areas, including personal awareness, social skills, learning skills, career interests and character education (Stott & Jackson, 2005). The authors advocated for service learning to be taught and led by guidance counselors for optimal character development and civic growth. For educators, partnering with the guidance counselors to co-teach is a good strategy to develop projects, which help students with personal growth and development (Stott & Jackson, 2005).

Partnering with governments and organizations. Service learning has also been studied as it correlates with other initiatives by governments, non-profits, or foundations. Another aspect of high quality service learning projects that allow for greater personal growth is the important connection between service and school/community goals. A multi-year service learning program took place at a sixth through eighth grade middle school, utilizing the Millennium Development Goals as a framework (Wall & Edmunds, 2009). The Millennium Development Goals are a blueprint agreed to by all the world’s countries and developmental

institutions. They include: eradicating extreme hunger and poverty; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other infectious diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and partnering for global development (United Nations, 2014). In this study there was a lack of understanding from students between the actions they were taking part in during service learning, and the greater connections to problems and issues locally and world-wide. There was a deliberate effort among service learning practitioners to connect Millennium Goals and service learning participation to rectify this issue. Researchers noted from observations an increase in the connections between service learning to a greater understanding of world issues and problems, in this case, global poverty (Wall & Edmunds, 2009).

These studies all relate different connections between curriculum integration, service learning and personal growth. Like any challenging endeavor, there are pitfalls to embarking on service learning with students. This is what will be explored next.

Pitfalls to Personal Growth in Service Learning

There are pitfalls and risks of engaging in service learning projects, especially those that are not well-crafted, thoughtfully planned, or well executed. This section will explore some of the problems that can be encountered in service learning, especially those that may actually increase bias and do more harm than good.

Otherring. Otherring is considered the objectification of another person or group, developing stereotypes, and is often related to race, ethnicity or gender (Dervin, 2011). According to Briscoe, there are three subordinating strategies of otherring: the misinterpretation of the other, the marginalization of the other, and the potential resulting harm (Briscoe, 2005).

Researchers have noted that otherring and deficit thinking are risks of participation in service learning (McBrien, 2008; Marr, 2014). Specifically, researchers pointed to how international service learning develops empathy, knowledge of social groups and the belief and ability to work for human rights (Hughes, 2014). The author cautioned how these lessons can be lost through experiences that confirm deficit perspectives, and shared a guiding perspective of service learning as reciprocity, not charity. In other words, service learning needs to be understood as beneficial and equal status by all parties. School leaders must carefully monitor service learning projects to make sure that they feature student empathy, respect, long term involvement, and perspective taking and avoid the pitfalls that increase stereotyping and perceptions of charity (Hughes, 2014). For significant personal growth to occur, students must view the service learning experience from a place of reciprocity, mutual respect, and open communication.

Lessening democracy. Another perception is that service learning is actually lessening democracy, because students are do-

ing the service work that some believe is the government's responsibility (Koliba, 2004). Koliba (2004) attempts to dismantle a claim that service learning is limiting participation in democracy and leading to the privatization of citizens. Crenson and Ginsberg (2002) claimed that civic education used to focus on teaching kids about the electoral process, and now with service learning, the focus was on students performing tasks that used to be done by government. These researchers saw educational institutions as complicit in pushing direct service instead of collective political action. In addition, Koliba (2004) was concerned with planning and developing an ideologically inclusive project that "downsized" citizenship, or in other words, focused on individual action versus collective. She offered five suggestions to deal with this issue, including creating a safe space to discuss politics, sharing the problems with service, encouraging in-depth experiences instead of surface ones, and noting the connections between wider reform and community assets (Koliba, 2004). Adding frank conversations with students about these concerns to curricular planning would help develop trust and the potential for student transformation. The pitfalls of service learning listed here impact student growth. Research made clear that to be effective, service learning must be carefully planned to make connections between students and communities, and to provide equal status participation from the providers and recipients of service learning.

Conclusion

There were many themes that emerged from this review of service learning literature. Service learning was presented as developmentally appropriate for the challenges of adolescence, which include decreasing levels of engagement and parental communication (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & Iver, 1993). In addition, service learning served to engage learners in developmentally appropriate pedagogy and this can in turn lead to greater personal development in middle level students. Service learning was used in several of the studies as a targeted instructional approach for an area of need, such as improving relationships with peers and teachers. Another theme was that several studies found different levels of personal growth linked to service learning in K-16 students. Some findings included early adolescents, and one study even suggested that sixth grade is the best time to see the most personal growth (Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000). Student engagement was increased through participation in service learning, and this yielded increased attendance, better academic performance, and higher motivation (Billig, 2011).

In addition, the need for regular reflection in service learning projects, and how that increases positive results for students, both academic and personal, was an important thread in this body of research. Making connections

between action in service learning and the deeper meaning clear for students increased the many benefits of service learning. Another theme that emerged was the importance of reciprocity in service learning—viewing service as mutually beneficial to students and the recipients of service. Service learning has the power to reduce bias, to increase leadership skills, and to improve parent and child communication, among many other academic benefits. This literature review provided a window into the personal growth of students related to high quality service learning projects.

Recommendations and Implications

While this review provided ample evidence of the personal growth of students who participate in service learning projects, it held only a few examples of studies focused on early adolescents. This gap in the literature needs to be filled. Middle level students, as noted earlier, are developmentally positioned to gain the most from service learning pedagogy. Studies that seek to discover the relationships between early adolescence and service learning are needed to further analyze the possibilities for this teaching and learning tool. The implications for this literature review include a deep understanding of how service learning can impact students. This understanding can be applied at the school, district, state and national level. In addition, this review lays the groundwork for further study in the experiences of early adolescent students engaged in service learning.

References

- Allport, G. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Billig, S. (2011). Making the most of your time: Implementing the K-12 service-learning standards for quality practice. *Prevention Researcher, 18*(1) 8-13.
- Carlisle, M. (2011). Healthy relationships and building developmental assets in middle school students. *Canadian Journal of Education, 34*(3), 18-32.
- Conner, J. (2010). Learning to unlearn: How a service-learning project can help teacher candidates to reframe urban students. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 26* (5), 1170-1177.
- Crenson, M. A., & Ginsberg, B. (2002). *Downsizing democracy: How America sidelined its citizens and privatized its public*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Dovidio, J., Glick, P., & Rudman, L. (2005). *On the nature of prejudice: Fifty years after Allport*. Blackwell, Malden, MA.
- Eccles J., Midgley C., Wigfield A., Buchanan C.M., Reuman D., Flanagan C., & Iver, D.M. (1993). Development during adolescence. The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents' experiences in schools and in families. *American Psychology, 48*(2), 90-101.
- Eppler, M., Ironsmith, M., Dingle, S., & Erickson, M. (2011). Benefits of service-learning for freshmen college students and elementary school children. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 11*(4),102-115.
- Erickson, J., & O'Connor, S. (2000). Service-learning's effect on prejudice: does it reduce or promote it? In C. O'Grady (Ed.), *Transforming education, transforming the world: The integration of service-learning and multicultural education into higher education* (pp. 59-70). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Fair, C.D., Davis, A., & Fischer, V. (2011). "It makes them so happy": 4th-Graders' reflections on intergenerational service learning. *Childhood Education, 87*(3), 177-178.
- Gorski, P. (2008). The myth of the culture of poverty. *Educational Leadership, 65*(7), 32-36.
- Hoffman, A., & Wallach, J. (2007). Reducing self-entitlement attitudes through service learning. *Community College Enterprise, 13*(1), 81-91.
- Hughes, C. (2014). Service learning 'commands respect and understanding'. *International School, 16*, 17-19. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.neu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1528367491?accountid=12826>
- Koebler, J. (2011, June). National high school graduation rates improve. *U.S. News and World Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/high-school-notes/2011/06/13/national-high-school-graduation-rates-improve>.
- Koliba, C. J. (2004). Service-learning and the downsizing of democracy: Learning our way out. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 10*(2), 57-68.
- Kohl, H. (1995). *"I won't learn from you" and other thoughts on creative maladjustment*. The New Press, New York.
- Louie-Badua, L. J., & Wolf, M. (2008). The spiritual nature of service-learning. *New Directions for Youth Development, 118*, 91-95.
- Martin, L., & Smolen, L. (2010). Using citizenship education, adolescent literature, and service learning to promote social justice. *International Journal of Learning, 17*(9), 425-432.
- Partners Against Hate. (2004). *Building community and combating hate: lessons from the middle school classroom*. Retrieved from http://www.partnersagainsthate.org/educators/middle_school_lesson_plans.pdf.
- Payne, K., & Edwards, B. (2010). Service learning enhances education for young adolescents. *Phi Delta Kappan, 91*(5), 27-30.
- Richards, M., Cornelli Sanderson, R., Celio, C., Grant, J., Choi, I, George, C., & Deane, K. (2013). Service-learning in early adolescence: Results of a school-based curriculum. *Journal of Experiential Education, 36*(1), 5-21.
- Scales, P. C., Blyth, D. A., Berkas, T. H., & Kielsmeier, J. C. (2000). The effects of service-learning on middle school students' social responsibility and academic success. *The Journal of Early Adolescence, 20*(3), 332-358.
- Simmons, R. G., & Blyth, D.A. (1987). *Moving into adolescence: The impact of pubertal change and school context*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

- Sims, C. (2010). Service-learning mentoring for high school transition and student leadership. *Techniques: Connecting Education and Careers*, 85(4), 24-29.
- Stott, K., & Jackson, A. (2005). Using service learning to achieve middle school comprehensive guidance. *Program Professional School Counseling*, 9(2), 156-159.
- Teaching Tolerance. (2014). *Test yourself for hidden bias*. Retrieved from <http://www.tolerance.org/activity/test-yourself-hidden-bias>.
- Terry, A., & Panter, T. (2010). Students make sure the Cherokees are not removed . . . again: A study of service-learning and artful learning in teaching history. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 34(1), 156-176.
- The Forum for Education and Democracy. (2008). *Democracy at risk: The need for a new federal policy in education*. Retrieved from <http://www.forumforeducation.org/>.
- Wall, A., & Edmunds, J. (2009). Schoolwide literacy and service-learning through the Millennium Development Goals. *Voices from the Middle*, 17(1), 16-23.