
Service-Learning Linked to Standards for a Successful Middle School Experience

Virginia M. Jagla, PhD
National Louis University

Education is a social process. Education is growth. Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself. – John Dewey

The National Service-Learning Partnership (2005) defines service-learning as “a teaching method that engages young people in solving problems within their schools and communities as part of their academic studies or other type of intentional learning activity. Service-learning helps students master important curriculum content by supporting their making meaningful connections between what they are studying and its many applications.”

The intention of service-learning is to experience democracy in action by planning and carrying through worthwhile activities to benefit others in society. Service-learning can be a meaningful variable affecting student learning. Contemporary service-learning programs address learning standards, respect students’ individual learning styles, and link educational and service goals with the responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society. Students learn through the experiences themselves as well as reflection on the process. Service-learning is a powerful pedagogy which engages the use of academic skills to address and solve real-life problems in the community. The number and depth of high-quality service-learning programs is increasing in schools. Service-learning has been a part of Field Middle School in Northbrook, IL for about 12 years. Field Middle School is a nationally recognized “Leader School” for its incorporation of service-learning.

Research abounds regarding the use of service-learning in K-12 schools. Much of the research addresses academic learning. Various studies have been done to gain more insight

into the pedagogy. One such study found students in quality service-learning schools showed moderate to strong positive gains on student achievement tests in language arts and/or reading, engagement in school, sense of educational accomplishment and homework completion (Weiler, et. al., 1998). Other studies have found students who participated in service-learning have achieved higher scores on the state test of basic skills (Anderson, et. al., 1991). Further research indicates elementary and middle school students who participated in service-learning had improved problem-solving skills and increased interest in academics (Stephens, 1995). In their comprehensive book, *Serve and learn: Implementing and evaluating service learning in middle and high schools*, Pritchard and Whitehead (2004) show how service-learning can improve intellectual development, increase academic achievement, and can be instrumental in accelerating school reform.

The service-learning coordinator teaches humanities and science at Field Middle School. The rest of her time is spent in coordinating the various service-learning projects which permeate the academic curriculum. She has learned much regarding service-learning pedagogy during her five years at the school. She has grown to understand service-learning “needed to truly be connected with the curriculum... it needs to connect somewhere within the curriculum to state standards to what you are doing and make it a real life experience for the kids.” By perusing the standards which are expected to be addressed in the appropriate grade level, teachers can decide which ones lend themselves to service-learning projects. The academic learning standards should be made transparent to the students at the middle and high school level. Often the students come up with ideas or a different twist to an established idea.

The service-learning coordinator credits service-learning with helping students in a variety of academic endeavors. Evidence relating higher achievement at Field Middle School with the embedded nature of service-learning is anecdotal. There are, however many studies which delineate this correlation. Research studies have found students involved in service-learning have earned higher grades (Shumer, 1994; Shaffer, 1993; Dean and Murdock, 1992; O'Bannon, 1999). In another study 83% of schools with service-learning programs reported grade point averages of participating service-learning students improved 76% of the time (Follman, 1999). Middle and high school students who participated in service-learning tutoring programs increased their grade point averages and test scores in reading/language arts and math and were less likely to drop out of school (Supik, 1996; Rolzinski, 1990).

The principal feels when people talk about curriculum revision, they are often referring to additions in what he refers to as “the mile wide and an inch deep” method. Many educators feel pressured by the No Child Left Behind mandate to “cover” vast amounts of curriculum in their lessons. “We are trying just the opposite.” By spending more time with the service-learning projects, he feels the students gain deeper understanding rather than surface knowledge. The trick here is to “uncover” the comprehensive understandings inherent in any subject.

Other important studies have shown students who participated in high quality service-learning programs displayed an increase in measures of school engagement and achievement in mathematics than their peers in control groups (Melchior, 1999). Another study found students who participated in service-learning endeavors came to class on time more often, completed more classroom tasks and took the initiative to ask questions more often (Loesch-

Griffin, et. al., 1995). In a variety of research studies, schools sustaining service-learning programs convey student engagement has resulted in increased attendance each year during a three-year period of time (Follman, 1998; 1999; O'Bannon, 1999). In studies with students involved in service-learning, research has shown they had higher attendance rates when compared with their contemporaries in control groups (Shaffer, 1993; Supik, 1996; Shumer, 1994). The replication of studies depicting increased attendance rates is significant. When students are engaged and choose to come to school more regularly, they can acquire more consistent understanding in all subject areas. Lack of motivation is an underlying cause for students being "left behind" in schools. Service-learning pedagogy affords more impetus to learn and sparks enthusiasm as well as meaningful understanding.

Many of the service-learning projects piloted at Field Middle School have been so successful they have been continued as a regular part of the curriculum. There are at least ten such programs in existence which have found their niche in particular grade levels. One example is their STARS (Students Tutoring And Responding to Students) program in which eighth graders take on mentoring roles for many of the sixth graders in need. This program also involves peer mediation when necessary. "We just had mediation yesterday with kids after training and they did wonderfully. I am happy that a lot of the programs that were initiated and piloted really took off."

Another such program is the Computer Partners. A senior is coupled with a seventh grader. The seventh grader teaches basic computer skills to the senior in a comfortable one-on-one situation in the middle school's computer lab. The class includes a juice and cookies

break when seniors and young adolescents can engage in relaxed conversation. These classes continue with the same pairs once a week for three weeks.

The service-learning coordinator indicated as a science teacher, “We teach a lot about environmental studies with recycling components. We teach that all through the science program in an academic way. We do recycle with the kids during advisory. During the week they do some clean ups. There is also a unit in which they investigate and research certain topics dealing with the environment and present it to younger kids... and talk about the importance of recycling... It is not just doing recycling here but spreading the word.”

The wellness unit is an integration of humanities and physical education. Much of the academic portion of this unit is “done through gym, where the kids spend about three to four weeks talking about wellness and diet.” Drug and alcohol awareness is included in this unit. The sixth graders plan and implement a 5K walk for K-5 students and the community. As a part of this event, the middle level students disseminate the information they have learned. “They write papers on it in PE, and then we hold our own 5K where we invite community members, moms and dads and talk about wellness. We print out their papers and pamphlets... There is also a raffle portion that goes with the 5K. The sixth graders do a lot of the research and investigating through their humanities class. They write letters to community members to solicit donations for raffle prizes... Much of the money that we earn from that raffle goes to the charity that they have selected through their research in class.” Math skills are increased through the money raising efforts. Math classes also chart the course for the 5K run/walk.

At Field Middle School service-learning involvement has planted the seed. The students are becoming engaged citizens and hopefully that continues, even beyond high school.

Students feel comfortable with their ability to work with diverse populations. They are comfortable with organizing and running events. These are experiences they can draw on in the future. Another eighth grader told me “Although it’s meant to serve the community, I think I’ve learned more how to interact with people of different ages and who have different challenges in life... I think that the biggest thing I’ve learned is how to be patient...” These feelings are not unique to the students at Field Middle School. Research has shown many other students who engaged in quality service-learning programs have reported increased acceptance of cultural diversity (Melchior, 1999; Berkas, 1997). Additional studies demonstrate students who engaged in service-learning showed progression over time in their awareness of cultural differences and attitudes toward helping others (Shaffer, 1993; Stephens, 1995).

When curriculum is enriched by service-learning pedagogy, much more than academics is enhanced for the students involved. One research study found high school students who participated in high quality service-learning programs were more likely to develop bonds with more adults, agreed they could learn from and work with the elderly and disabled and felt they trusted others besides parents and teachers to whom they could turn for help (Morgan and Streb, 1999). Another study demonstrated students who engaged in service-learning showed greater empathy and cognitive complexity than comparison groups (Courneya, 1994).

Middle school is a great time in students’ lives to be involved in such significant ventures as service-learning. One eighth grader at Field Middle School summed up his point of view. “You get a good feeling because you’re helping someone when they need your help... you can give something to them... I just hope more kids do service-learning. I think it’s really good experience.”

Thoughtful service-learning pedagogy engages the whole learner in meaningful, constructive scholarship. Thoroughly engaged students are constructing their own knowledge, which stretches far beyond the typical facts and information imparted in daily lessons. The goal for our students should be to surpass standards, not just meet them. Service-learning can help reach this goal. The teach-test model furthers automatism in students. True mastery or concept attainment requires more in depth, constructive learning. Students are not being left behind at Field Middle School. Students, teachers and administrators agree service-learning contributes greatly to their academic success.

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