



COMMUNITY SERVICE: RATIONALE, OUTCOMES, AND BEST PRACTICES

Service Opportunities for Youth with Emotional and Behavioral Challenges

The number of youth volunteering in the United States is at an all-time high and is growing rapidly (Culbertson, 1999). Increasingly, youth are guided towards volunteer opportunities by formal programs. Service is used widely as a strategy by youth development programs, and service learning programs have become commonplace in schools. There has also been an increase in the number of after school, summer, and international service programs in which youth can participate (Youth Service America, 2000).

There is also early and growing evidence that well conceived service opportunities can provide these benefits for a population more often associated with needing, rather than performing, services: youth with emotional or behavioral challenges. Indeed, it has been suggested that successful experiences in service is especially valuable and beneficial in the lives of children who face challenges and risk factors in their lives (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). Service activities offer a “developmental opportunity that draws upon youths’ preexisting strengths and their desire to be meaningfully involved in society” (Youniss & Yates, 1997, p. 14).

Service learning represents an avenue of positive youth development through meaningful participation in the community. This can confer a variety of positive outcomes. Furthermore, the conception of youth as community servants not only represents a radical departure from focusing on the deficits of youth, but it also extends the philosophy of building on strengths. In

this model of “enrichment reciprocity,” youth are enriched through enriching others.

Outcomes Associated with Service

Theories of individual and community resilience highlight how community service simultaneously develops, supports, and integrates individuals and community institutions (Benson, 1995). When projects are well implemented (see “Best Practices,” below), the way is opened for a variety of possible benefits. Planning to provide well-designed service opportunities brings community groups and organizations together. Successfully participating in service ties young people to the community and to nurturing adults. Youth value and enjoy their participation in service learning projects. Finally, communities benefit directly from the service contributions of youth.

The positive outcomes for youth that stem from participation in service learning have been the focus of a fair amount of empirical investigation. Research has shown that participation in service can increase youth’s self-esteem, moral reasoning, and identity development (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988; Root, 1997). Evidence also links youth participation in service with decreases in negative behaviors such as drug use, violence, and teen sex (Giles & Eyler, 1994; O’Donnell, et al., 1999), or with lowered risk factors associated with such negative behaviors (McNamara, 2000). What is more, certain types of service—most notably volunteer

tutoring— have been shown to have a positive impact on educational achievement (Hedin, 1987).

Recent research has begun to address the question of whether or not these benefits can successfully be extended to youth with emotional and behavioral challenges. The nature of their disabilities—including deficits in social skills, difficulty in cooperative group activities, and high needs for predictability and structure— may make it difficult to structure successful participation in service activities.

Muscott (2000) searched the literature for research on outcomes associated with service learning programs involving students with emotional or behavioral disorders. He was able to locate information on about 11 programs, and these programs involved children and adolescents from inclusive settings to residential treatment programs. In discussing the findings from program evaluations, Muscott points out that, while the evaluation methods tended to be “less than rigorous,” there is still reason for cautious optimism. Most of the programs offered only anecdotal evidence of success; however, Muscott notes that the anecdotal information nevertheless provided consistent evidence that students benefited from their participation. In particular, students and their teachers “were extremely satisfied with these programs...and felt empowered by the experience of providing service...to members of the community” (365). A small subset of the studies also reported positive results using more rigorous evaluation methods. In concluding his review, Muscott points out that the type of evidence available from these studies is consistent with what was available in the “early research” (of the late 1980s and early 1990s!) on the outcomes of service participation for youth without disabilities.

Best Practices in Service Learning

There is currently a strong consensus on what constitutes best practice in the design of service learning programs. This consensus traces its roots to 1989, when the *Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning* were issued at the Wingspread Conference. This list of principles was the product of a two-year process which brought together experienced practitioners from more than 75 organizations and drew on their combined wisdom and experience. These principles have been widely accepted by practitioners in the field, and what is more, there is empirical evidence supporting the idea that programs that put the principles into practice achieve stronger results for program participants (see

Muscott, 2000, for a review). The principles, taken here from Honnet and Poulen (1989), describe an effective service program as one which does the following:

1. Engages people in responsible and challenging actions for the common good.
2. Provides structured opportunities for people to reflect critically on their service.
3. Articulates clear service and learning goals for everyone involved.
4. Allows for those with needs to define those needs.
5. Clarifies the responsibilities of each person and organization involved.
6. Matches service providers and service needs through a process that recognizes changing circumstances.
7. Expects genuine, active, and sustained organizational commitment.
8. Includes training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals.
9. Insures that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interests of all involved.
10. Is committed to program participation by and with diverse populations.

Beyond the program level, communities as a whole must also become active if they expect to stimulate and support the provision of sufficient numbers of quality service learning opportunities (Benson, 1995; Zoerink, Magafas, & Pawelko, 1997).

With best practices in place at the program and community level, communities can tap a greatly underused resource—youth with mental health challenges—who can themselves find personal enrichment while simultaneously improving the communities in which they live.

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