

## Service-Learning – A Developmental Experience for *All Kids*

Service-learning is a powerful tool for educators and community workers as a way to bring positive youth programming to young people in any given community. Through service-learning, an organization can bring many of the 40 developmental assets to youth (Benson, 1997). These developmental assets outlined by the Search Institute are the building blocks young people need to grow up healthy, competent, and caring. According to the 40 developmental assets framework, the more assets youth have, the less likely they are to engage in risky behaviors. The inverse is also true; the more assets youth have, the more likely they are to engage in thriving behaviors.

Service-learning experiences can have a positive impact on the developmental trajectory of preadolescents and adolescents. In recent times, service-learning has become a popular mechanism in community-based youth programs as well as in the educational arena. “Increases in funds for service programs during the past several years, coupled with increasing educational research supporting service, have resulted in the widespread implementation of service-learning” (Johnson, 199, p.455). From 1984 through 1997, the number of K-12 students involved in service programs rose from 900,000 to 12,604,740, and the percentage of high school students participating in service-learning nationwide increased from 2% to 25% (Billing, 2000, p.659). This continued substantial increase over time may be reflective of the positive outcomes and positive experiences young people obtain through this type of strength-based youth development approach. Schukar, in his 1997 article *Enhancing the Middle School Curriculum Through Service-Learning*, contends that it is the “direct day-to-day impact on students” (p.182) that is most important. The links youth create through helping and caring about the community have a powerful impact. Service-learning provides youth with the opportunity to directly experience the political systems as part of their education thus developing active and engaged citizens (Delli Carpini, 2000). Service-learning programs can, if implemented properly, have a positive effect on increasing a student’s sense of civic responsibility (Hepburn, 1997). Advocates for service-learning cite the lack of adult turnout at the voting polls and a reduction in the number of adults who volunteer their time to participate on community boards and special events as indicators of the need for service-learning curriculum in the schools (Chapin, 1999). By engaging youth in community service activities, they begin to realize at a very young age that they are a valued resource and can make a positive difference in their own communities. Feeling valued by the community and obtaining the maturity and knowledge that young people can make a positive difference in their own community are strong qualities all young people can benefit from and are key to developing healthy, competent, and caring youth. Therefore, if communities can fully involve and fully engage their young citizens, the value of community service will grow with them as they develop physically, mentally, and emotionally into adults.

In service-learning courses, students participate in a service activity for a nonprofit organization and then “reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996. p. 222). The concept of

structured reflection is key to enhancing lessons learned from a service activity. The reflection process serves to concretize lessons taking them from the abstract and placing them in a much more cognitive realm for youth. In a study conducted by Scales, Blyth, Berkas, and Kielsmeir (2000), the researchers found that “Students who reported doing high levels of reflection additionally improved in their pursuit of good grades, maintained their perception that school provides personal development opportunities, and decreased less than did other students in their commitment to class work” (p.349). Reflection is a key component of service-learning and should be included in any working definition. Based on a strong reflection philosophy, Great Lakes Center for Youth Development has developed the following definition of service-learning.

### **Community Service**

True service-learning entrenches youth in the experience of service at a much higher level than generic community service. Service-learning activities go far beyond participation in a one-time volunteer experience. Although generic volunteering is an important community development tool, service-learning focuses on benefiting not only on the community but the participants as well. In fact, a strong focus is the development of the individuals who are participating in the experience. “Students most strongly felt that they made a contribution and had the opportunity to express important personal values” (Hecht & Fusco, 1996, p.10). Often, generic volunteer experiences are pre-planned by an individual or organization, and volunteers are recruited and instructed what to do to accomplish the project. However, with service-learning, the individual participants are involved in selecting, planning, implementing, and reflection upon the project. By participating in all levels of service from the selection to the reflection, youth participants are exposed to many practical skill-building activities, thus, compounding the impact of service by enhancing and increasing their skills.

### **Resilience**

Thoughtfully implemented service-learning curricula can develop strong resiliency skills in the youth participants. Through their service experience, students can view themselves as important contributors to the overall success of the experience, enabling and encouraging them to assume some responsibility for others in the community (Hink & Brandell, 1999). When youth have the perception that they are valued by the community they live in, they tend to stay engaged in the positive activities that are offered to them. “Service-learning is an important tool to build resilience in young people. Community-based programs that engage children and youth in such activities and protecting the local environment, conducting food drives for the hungry, and participating in library-based reading programs provide youngsters with firsthand experience cooperating with their neighbors. These activities not only develop participants’ knowledge and skills, but also provide powerful evidence that communities support their residents. Through their participation, youngsters learn that they are valued community members, can contribute to the community’s well-being, and can help overcome a sense of alienation and disenfranchisement” (Wang, Haertel, & Herbert, 1997, p.7).

Youth today are faced with many difficult issues. There are many opportunities for youth to engage in risky behaviors. These behaviors include, but are not limited to, alcohol and drug use and abuse, early sexual activity and school failure. Youth who are most likely to engage in these behaviors are prime candidates for the benefits of service-learning. Service-learning is an active form of learning; it gives a hands-on, practical meaning to bookwork. Benard (1995) argued that there are protective factors that will reduce a young person's risk of participating in risky behaviors. These protective factors fall under the following three major categories: supportive relationships, high expectations, and meaningful participation. All of these categories are positively affected by a young person's participation in service-learning activities.

**Service-learning has been found to develop resiliency skills in youth.** Children who demonstrated resiliency often have the following four characteristics: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose (Krovetz, 1999). Service-learning offers a forum for youth to practice problem-solving skills from identification of the problem to planning a solution, implementation, and structured reflection. Service-learning is an excellent strategy to develop their social competence. Youth become engaged in several layers of the community and learn how to interact within them. To strengthen these characteristics so they have a positive impact on youth, the following are also key: a caring environment, positive expectations, and participation (Krovetz, 1999). With these three characteristics present, youth engaged in service-learning have an excellent opportunity to develop strong resistance skills.

**Service-learning can be an effective model for creating rich leadership development experiences for young people.** However, in order to elicit the appropriate leadership development from the experience, several key factors need to exist within the experiences. Youth and adults must form true partnerships. Rather than a mentoring situation here, there is a perception of the young person needing the assistance of an older person. The partnership stresses a relationship that is mutually beneficial for both participants, and the success of the relationship is based on the strength of both parties (Des Marais, Yang, & Frazanehkia, 2000). With youth and adults focusing on a mutually beneficial relationship, young people are removed from a perceived place of their successes being dependent on an adult to place of personal empowerment and knowledge that they, themselves, can create positive change.

**Service experiences change the very context of learning.** During a service-learning experience, young people are introduced to the idea that their whole community is a learning environment and learning is not confined to a school day or a classroom. Young people start to make solid connections between community needs and means to access resources to meet these needs and learn that all people can choose to become leaders. Leadership is not confined to an opportunity for a small number of people with a specified set of skills (Des Marais et al., 2000). All citizens within the community should have the opportunity to express their leadership skills and engage themselves in community-wide improvement efforts. This idea takes a community that is willing and able to view its youth as positive, capable resources whose potential to ignite community

change is present now, rather than looking at youth as adults-in-waiting who may be a community leader at some future point, but not today.

Students who are given a substantial role in community-based service-learning projects through direct involvement in planning to solve community dilemmas provide a major advantage to the social capital of rural communities (Ferrari & Worrall, 2000). In rural communities, nonprofit resources are typically quite limited. In order to sustain quality levels of services, nonprofit organizations rely on strategic collaborative initiatives and the use of volunteers as a key resource. Allowing youth to be a partner in this critical volunteer infrastructure assists the nonprofit community in maintaining and expanding services and allows youth to take leadership roles in the community.

Great Lakes Center for Youth Development's (GLCYD) interest in service-learning from an applied research perspective is the study of the impact of service-learning experiences on the developmental trajectory of "at-risk" youth. Over the years, GLCYD has developed a service-learning curriculum that is designed to engage "at-risk" youth, build on their strengths, and prepare and empower them to become fully engaged in the community. GLCYD does not assess "at-risk" status; this is done by service organizations and selected youth are referred to the service-learning program. The service-learning curriculum has five major components:

1. Youth identification of a community need and an appropriate service project to fill the need
2. In-depth investigation and learning about the problem and solutions strategies
3. Implementation of the service project itself
4. Structured reflection on the whole process designed to integrate the positive values youth experiences during the entire process
5. Mini-mastery session designed for youth participants to engage in learning and earn certification and/or develop a skill set

During the implementation of this curriculum, it is critical that the process is facilitated by a responsible adult but is also driven by the youth participants. Youth had to be given the leadership roles in order to maximize positive results and be fully empowered.

For service-learning to be effective, service projects must meet an actual community need. Many youth service projects have been preconstructed and really fill a nicety rather than an actual community need. Youth participants should have the opportunity to look at hard community data while in this **first phase of the curriculum, needs identification**. Useful tools include recent community needs assessments, need lists collected by a local volunteer center, collection of flyers listing needs from nonprofit organizations, and recent media reports describing needs. Additionally, youth should be queried to collect their ideas for community improvements and services that need to be undertaken.

After selecting a service project, the youth group outlines specific learning objectives. Learning objectives can include both what they want to learn from

implementing the service projects and additional learning youth want to gain about the population served. For example, if the youth would like to run a fund raiser car wash to assist the local Humane Society, the youth would develop learning objectives around running a fundraiser and learning objectives about the Humane Society. This process clearly expresses the learning objectives for youth and allows them to evaluate the process against these objectives.

**The second phase of this curriculum is an in-depth investigation.** During this phase, the youth attempt to answer the questions that have been outlined during the identification phase. Typically, the youth group would ask a speaker or speakers to attend this second meeting and present additional information about the identified problem. In the example given above, a staff member or volunteer from the Humane Society might come in and present information on programmatic goals and outcomes: the number of pets taken in each year, the number of pets adopted, the fiscal challenges of the organization, and what life would be like without the Humane Society serving in the community. This would give the youth group an opportunity to understand the problem more in-depth. This also would allow the youth to ask additional questions and further develop their case for serving the Humane Society.

**The third phase of this curriculum is the actual service delivery.** Service delivery can come in many forms: direct service, indirect service, advocacy, and fundraising. As part of their service delivery, the youth would identify a location for the service project to take place, develop and distribute a press release about the fundraiser, request materials from organizations or businesses, and plan the timeframe for the event.

**The fourth phase of the service-learning curriculum is the structured reflection activity.** Many service-learning or community service programs do not include a structured reflection piece to the curriculum. The structured reflection activity allows the youth to integrate the positive values learned during the three prior phases of the curriculum. Typical structured reflection sessions include making storyboards that describe the process, creating a public presentation, developing essays, or artwork such as paintings or clay sculptures.

**The fifth and final phase of the service-learning curriculum is to engage youth in mini-mastery projects.** These are designed to immerse youth in learning around a particular topic area that has been identified by the groups that will deliver new knowledge and encourage the youth to demonstrate retention and action based on new knowledge. These mastery sessions are designed to be quick wins for the youth participants allowing youth to feel an immediate sense of accomplishment and task mastery. Historically, these projects included CPR certification, first aid certification, babysitting certification and martial arts training. After the participants complete a five-week cycle, the cycle then repeats itself.

At the end of the year, a celebration event is held with the participants, their parents, and other support people in their lives. This event is designed to be a structured reflection of the accomplishment from the service-learning experiences. It gives the

parents and other supporters the opportunity to celebrate and discuss the positive changes they have witnessed in the youth during the course of the project. It also allows the youth an opportunity to recognize and acknowledge the support people who are critical to their healthy development.

Great Lakes Center for Youth Development (GLCYD) is currently working to expand this project in an attempt to extract deeper knowledge of the impact of service-learning on “at-risk” youth. The organization is interested in discovering how this intervention facilitates positive connections in the community and at the same time, reduces risk-taking behaviors. Additionally, GLCYD is currently developing an evaluation plan designed to discover the long-term impact service-learning has on “at-risk” youth. Over the course of the next year, GLCYD will expand the model in Marquette and Alger Counties. GLCYD will be looking for interested partners in other counties who are interested in working with this model in their communities as a mode of service delivery to ”at-risk” youth. To learn more about this project, please contact Dr. Carole L. Touchinski, Director of Research, at Great Lakes Center for Youth Development; [ctouchinski@glcyd.org](mailto:ctouchinski@glcyd.org) or 906-228-8919.