



Meaningful Service: Supporting Research

Research

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Research suggests that meaningful service perhaps is the most important of the *K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice*.

It might be obvious that any valuable service-learning experience should be meaningful — yet it is far from self-evident what the term “meaningful” implies. But the substantial positive impact meaningful service can have on students’ academic, civic, and developmental outcomes (Neal, Leeper, and Root 2009) calls for an examination of the ingredients required to reach true meaning. Though meaningful service implies service that is perceived as beneficial to its recipients and to the larger community, this article will focus on the importance of meaningfulness as defined by the service providers.

A number of factors have to be in place for a service-learning experience to be perceived as meaningful by students, i.e., the providers of the service. The first dimension relates to the way the experience allows for personal growth. Yates (1995) noted that opportunities to take on adult responsibilities and receive respect for doing work well “may lead [students] to think about who they are and who they can be.” Furco (2002) found that the students who were most strongly influenced by their service experiences were engaged in meaningful service activities that challenged them to some degree or ones in which they had responsibility and interest. The students’ sense of engagement was enhanced when they felt they were treated with respect by members of the community. To reach such outcomes, the service experience must be developmentally appropriate — that is, it must deal with an issue that can be understood by learners, and they must be reasonably well able to perform the corresponding service activity.

A second dimension relates to how students perceive their relationship with recipients of the service they provide.

Root and Billig (2008) affirmed that students found meaning in their service when they interacted with individuals faced with personal difficulties, confronting examples of injustice, or encountering inefficient policies. Direct contact “enabled [students] to connect to larger issues, both in the community and more generally in society.”

A third dimension relates to how the service experience changes the way students see themselves in the community or the wider society. While a number of studies have established that many young people feel disconnected from their communities and might have an egocentric way of viewing the world, effective service activities engage students emotionally with their communities (Root and Billig 2008). Catalano and colleagues (2004) showed that participation in communities helped students develop stronger connections to the community norms and values, thereby contributing to community cohesion.

While a meaningful project can have a lasting impact on students as well as recipients, it has the potential to serve an even higher purpose if it is firmly placed in its appropriate wider context. Students should be encouraged to analyze how the need they are addressing is but one step toward a broader vision of tackling the problem on the local, national, and global levels.

Thus service-learning projects that adhere to the standards help develop civic awareness and democratic citizenship (Root and Billig 2008). Through learning and reflection, students are capable of comparing their life situations to those of the people they serve and to place any need or problem in local and global contexts. Once students start to consider the possibility of changing social problems, they realize the importance of the learning component. It takes service to meet needs, but knowledge and skills to end them.

MEANINGFUL SERVICE: Evidence from the Research

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What Is Meaningful Service?

Meaningful service provides a sense of purpose, connection, relevance, and usefulness. The Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform (1995) defined a “meaningful contribution” as one that fills a recognized need in the community, is appropriate to the age of the students involved, results in a tangible or visible outcome or product, and demonstrates learning outcomes. In service-learning, all activities should have personal relevance for participants, and they should be appropriate to the ages and developmental abilities of the young people who are involved. Activities should be designed to be engaging and interesting, and should encourage participants to understand the social context in which their service is taking place.

Application to Service-Learning

- Melaville, Berg, and Blank (n.d.) pointed out that community-based learning helps students to draw on their prior knowledge, giving them “structured opportunities and tools for physically exploring their communities and interacting with many kinds of local experts” (p. 11).
- Root and Billig (in press) discovered that students found meaning in their service when they interacted with individuals faced with personal difficulties, confronting examples of injustice, or encountering inefficient policies. These types of interactions seemed to help students invest in an issue emotionally and move from an egocentric to a more sociocentric perspective on the world.
- In his study of 529 high school students who took part in high quality community service, service-learning, or service-based internship programs, Furco (2002) found that the students who were most strongly influenced by their service experiences were engaged in meaningful service activities that challenged them to some degree and/or ones in which they had responsibility and interest. The students’ sense of engagement was enhanced when they felt that they were being treated like adults or were treated with respect by members of the community. When students were challenged to take on adult roles, they showed greater willingness to meet the challenges and show teachers, service partners, peers, and themselves that they could do the job well. Conversely, when students were involved in service activities that they described as “useless,” “meaningless,” “boring,” or “pointless” (p. 43), their feelings of empowerment were very low. Student outcomes were greatest when students had some degree of control over the service activities, perceived that they were making a difference, and had a commitment to the cause that their service activities were designed to address. Students also experienced improved outcomes when program organizers paid attention to the quality of the relationships that were being developed among students, between students and teachers, and between students and community agency representatives.
- In a study of more than 1,400 high school students, Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) found that service that was perceived as meaningful prompted students to be more committed to their service-learning project and acquire greater knowledge and skills. Meaningfulness was related to students making important decisions, developing their own ideas for projects, feeling that they had made a contribution, and experiencing challenge.
- A study by Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) showed that participation in communities helped students develop a greater sense of efficacy and stronger connections to the community norms and values, thereby contributing to community cohesion. Outcomes were maximized when students interacted with others, developed skills, and felt rewarded upon project completion.
- Berman wrote (as cited in Kessler, 2000), “Young people are continually negotiating a sense of meaning, place, and commitment” (p. 69). He stated that young people are always asking questions such as, “Do I have a meaningful place in the social and political world? Are there values that I can make a commitment to and people I can stand with? Am I capable of contributing something useful to others that they will welcome and appreciate?” (p. 69). Young people must turn their aspirations into action in order to find their own answers to these questions.

- An analysis of three national studies on service-learning (Melchior & Bailis, 2002) supported this assertion. The authors wrote: “Most young people begin with a fairly well-developed sense of civic responsibility” (p. 211) and service-learning efforts “might best be understood as strengthening or reinforcing students’ generally positive set of attitudes rather than building a positive set of attitudes from scratch” (p. 211).
- Hart (2007) found that students in an Explorers Club that utilized service-learning to teach literacy were both more engaged and more focused on understanding literacy concepts when they could see their relevance to the service project.
- Youniss, McLellan, Su, and Yates (1999) studied inner-city African American youth and showed stronger positive outcomes when the service activity took place within their own communities and solved meaningful problems within the community.

Educational Research Supporting This Concept

- Pearce (1992) described the process of making meaning as an essential but often overlooked part of young people’s emotional growth (p. 190). Unfolding sense of meaning occurs in three stages. First, beginning around age 11, youth experience “an idealistic image of life” that becomes more palpable as they move into adolescence. Second, around age 14 or 15, young people feel strongly that “something tremendous is supposed to happen.” Finally, adolescents “sense a secret, unique greatness in themselves that seeks expression.” To fulfill these yearnings, young people search for a vehicle through which they can express their unique gifts and a person who can provide a strong role model for accomplishing this mission. Pearce warned that if these deep, developmentally motivated yearnings are not fulfilled, hope and idealism can easily give way to cynicism and despair.
- Dewey (1938) said that learning itself is a constant process of making meaning of the world and one’s individual experiences within social contexts. He believed that all personal development occurred when initial desires and instincts are tempered by learning experiences and shaped into more purposeful and conscious actions.
- Ravitz and Becker (n.d.) defined “meaningful thinking” tasks as having students: work on tasks with no indisputably correct answer, suggest or help plan classroom activities or topics, debate and argue a point of view sometimes different from their own, represent the same idea/relationship in more than one way, make conjectures about what they might learn, and/or lead a discussion or presentation for more than one hour. Meaningful tasks were also facilitated by teachers who raised unanswered questions, elicited student ideas and opinions, asked students to justify or explain their reasoning, and asked students to relate the work to their own experiences. Working in small groups to come up with a joint solution, writing an essay explaining one’s thoughts, and assessing one’s ownwork on an assignment were also considered meaningful cognitive tasks.
- The National Research Council’s (2003) summary of the research on schools that engage students similarly discussed the need to make teaching and learning relevant to the students’ experiences, cultures, and longterm goals.
- Dewey (1933) pointed out that four factors were necessary for a project to be educative; that is, the project must generate interest; have intrinsic worth; present problems that stimulate curiosity and create a demand for learning; and cover a considerable time span, being capable of fostering development over time.
- In a study of literacy programs, Guthrie, Anderson, Alao, and Rinehart (1999) found that connecting literacy instruction to real-world interactions led to better comprehension since abstract concepts were translated into concrete experiences.

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All Lift materials are based in the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice, available at www.nylc.org/standards.