

Service Learning in Georgia's Middle Schools

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Results of a survey administered in Georgia's middle schools reflect the current practice of teaching Service Learning to Georgia's middle schoolers. The author presents the validity of Service Learning programs and evaluates the results of the survey administered for this study.

The success of schools in preparing students with skills that enable them to achieve their goals and participate effectively in a democratic society depends on the quality of the curriculum (Murnane & Levy). When programs designed to meet the needs of learners provide them with contemporary skills, then the curriculum can be judged as effective. School curricula, however, have been plagued with the problem of not linking academic learning with what is happening in the real world (Hamburg, 1995). Like most other citizens, middle grade students also need to acquire skills that lead to successful living in this rapidly changing world. How will adolescents acquire needed competencies, if what is being taught in classrooms today bear little resemblance to the world they will live in tomorrow?

The research on service learning (National Helpers Network, 1995; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996; Wade, 1997) supports the belief that students learn best when they are actually engaged with those things they are expected to learn. Moreover, students are likely to be more motivated to learn when curriculum content relates to what they are actually concerned with. When school curricula fail to provide opportunities for students to take advantage of their interests and prepare them with skills for successful living, then that curricula must be questioned and a search for alternatives convened.

Service Learning

Service learning, an educational concept that has been around for a while, but is relatively new terminology in

education, is an instructional method that brings relevance and meaning to the curriculum. This learning concept involves students in experiential (hands-on) activities that connect with what is happening in the real world. As an approach to the teaching and learning process, service learning capitalizes on the developmental characteristics of adolescents by engaging them in activities that foster self-development, attitudes of caring and concern for others, decision making skills, and civic responsibility. Service learning provides meaningful real-life experiences that give students practical reasons to learn academic skills and knowledge (Wade, 1997).

“Effective service learning programs can be implemented at the middle school level to enhance the educational learning experience for youth involved” (George, 1997 p. 176). The organizational structure of the middle school with its emphasis on teaming, flexible scheduling, and interdisciplinary teaching is certainly conducive to accommodating service learning activities. Middle grade teachers can take full advantage of the teaming concept by planning together, arranging schedules, and grouping students to engage in service learning projects. In addition, there are other features of the middle school that facilitate inclusion of service learning. One, service learning can be offered through the exploratory curriculum as a class. Two, service learning can be extracurricular, particularly as a part of school service club activities. And three, it can be integrated into a specific subject as a thematic unit of study, or organized as class projects.

Why Include Service Learning in Middle Grades Curriculum?

The combination of service and learning is receiving considerable attention, especially in middle schools because it is consistent with the developmental aspects of how middle level students learn. In today's world, middle school students are challenged by numerous transitions that are unfolding in society. There is a need to make relevant the content of the classroom to their lives.

Many of our youth are lost to violence, drugs, and dropout. In the transition from middle school to high school, too many students leave underachieving, low in basic and critical reasoning skills, and uninformed about personal and civic responsibilities (Lipsitz, Mizell, Jackson, & Austin, 1997). The experiential focus of service learning is well suited to the

teaching and learning process of the middle school. It addresses the need for relevant and meaningful subject matter, developmentally appropriate instruction, and high quality learning experiences that are key elements in educating adolescents. The versatility of service learning is evidenced in the numerous projects and learning environments that students can pursue inside and outside of the classroom. In virtually any U.S. community, adolescents can become involved in service learning activities that focus on self development, community service, and the acquisition of knowledge.

At the middle level, incorporating service learning provides opportunities for students to interact with community agencies that influence their lives. Through this interaction, students become aware of the decision making process and understand how various agencies influence their lives on a daily basis.

Purpose

There is a recognition that students need to become more involved in their communities (Rifkin, 1997). This can be accomplished by including activities in middle grades curriculum that focus on community service. Hence, this research project sought to determine the prevalence of service learning projects in Georgia's middle schools. In addition to determining the prevalence of service learning projects in Georgia's middle schools, this research was also concerned with identifying the focus (type and characteristics) of those projects and the bases of support for service learning projects.

The importance of service learning as an integral part of middle school curricula was affirmed by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in the publication *Turning Points*. It was stated in that document that every middle school should include youth service-supervised activities helping others in the community or in the school in its core instructional program (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Since *Turning Points*, many others have come to believe that service learning should be a central element of the middle school curriculum and not just because of its obvious parallels to the philosophy behind the middle school, but also because its instructional strategy meshes with young adolescents' needs and capabilities" (Halsted, 1997).

Method

Population

The respondents were principals of Georgia's middle schools. They were a sample of the total number of middle school principals listed in the 1995-1996 Georgia Directory of Schools. This publication listed a total of 315 middle schools in the state of Georgia.

Questionnaire

A twenty-two item questionnaire, the Service Learning Prevalence Questionnaire (SLPQ) was developed for the study. The questionnaire was designed to determine the prevalence of service learning programs in Georgia's middle schools. While in the development stage, additional questions were added in order to gain more information about service learning activities in Georgia's middle schools. Those other questions solicited responses concerning the type and characteristics of service learning projects and the origin of support for the projects. In addition to these survey questions, respondents were asked to give school demographic data and state the importance of service learning in their school.

Procedure

A pilot questionnaire containing 22 items was mailed to principals in 14 middle schools listed in the 1995-1996 Georgia School Directory. These principals were asked to review the format and items on the questionnaire, provide feedback for revision and improvement of the questionnaire, and to complete the SLPQ. Based upon principals' feedback, some language in the questionnaire was changed, but the questionnaire retained its 22 item format. After revisions were made by the researcher, the revised SLPQ was sent to the principals of Georgia's 315 middle schools. An initial and one follow-up mailing yielded a return of 215 questionnaires (68%). Limited resources precluded additional follow-up mailings to nonrespondents.

Findings

Prevalence

The primary purpose for this study was to determine the extent to which service learning projects pervaded Georgia's middle schools. One hundred and sixty-three of the 215 respondents to the survey indicated that there was an active service learning project in their middle school. This number represents 76% of the sample responding to the survey and 52% of the total population of middle schools in Georgia. It is deduced then, that at least half of Georgia's middle schools have service learning projects.

Fifty-two of the survey respondents indicated that there was no service learning project underway at their middle school. This represents 24% of middle schools that responded to the questionnaire. It is deduced then that a significant number of Georgia's middle schools do not have service learning activities as a part of their curriculum.

Focus

There are many forms that service learning can take on, but most can be categorized into one of three types: direct, indirect, and civic action or advocacy. Direct service learning projects involve personal contact with an individual or a group. Students tutoring and mentoring are examples of direct service learning. Indirect service learning projects focus on assisting others but not in direct contact. Examples of service learning projects with this focus include contributing food to a nursing home, obtaining and sending relief supplies to a disaster area, or donating to a charity. Civic action or advocacy service learning activities involve students being engaged in solving a community problem. These projects may also find students lobbying public officials, getting proclamations, or resolutions (Wade, 1997).

One hundred and twelve (52%) respondents placed their service learning project in the direct category which emphasizes personal contact with people. Fifty-six percent of the respondents who placed their service learning activities in the direct category indicated that their service learning activities focused on tutoring, advising, or mediation. Twenty two percent of the respondents believed their service learning activities to be indirect in nature.

And 17% of the respondents placed their service learning activities in the civic action or advocacy category. Nine percent of respondents made no decision regarding the category of service learning for their school activities.

Support

School functions and projects require a basis of support. It is no different with a service learning project. The SLPQ sought to identify the funding mechanisms that supported Georgia's middle schools in carrying out their service learning activities. Fifty percent of the respondents indicated that the main mode of support for service learning projects in their school was through the school budget. This was followed by 23 percent reporting support from a business partner. The remaining percentages of support were shared between community organizations and federal and state grants.

Importance of Service Learning

Today, there is a national network for service learning that recognizes its importance to student growth and development and that as a middle school instructional strategy, it is developmentally appropriate. As reform initiatives to improve the process of schooling continue to surface, the option of service learning gains in popularity as a way to improve instruction and educational outcomes. Recognizing this trend and support for service learning nationally, principals were asked to rate the importance of service learning in their school curriculum. Given the choices very important, somewhat important, not important, and no opinion, eighty-one percent of the respondents indicated they believed that service learning was very important to have in the middle school curriculum.

Conclusion

Survey results substantiate that at least 50% of Georgia's middle schools have active service learning projects as part of the curriculum. As noted earlier, reputable sources have called for service learning programs in all of the nation's middle schools because of its relationship to the developmental characteristics and instructional needs of adolescents. Others

(Rifkin, 1997) view it as an effort to integrate civic values into the schooling process.

Survey results also indicate that almost a fourth (24%) of the respondents indicated that there was not an active service learning project in their middle school. This is an indication that service learning has not permeated in middle schools in Georgia to the degree called for in Turning Points.

Research findings indicate that fifty percent of the middle schools reported that support for service learning is provided through the school's budget. A school's allocated dollars are distributed among competing curriculum needs. As a single source, a school's budget has its limitations. To sustain service learning activities, Georgia's Middle Schools need to consider other sources of support as partners to carry out service learning projects. In fact, service learning activities unfold best when there is collaboration between school and community.

It is apparent from the survey results that more than half of the service learning projects in Georgia's Middle Schools concentrate on tutoring, advising, and mediation. There is room for Georgia's Middle Schools service learning projects to become more community oriented by placing additional emphasis on civic action and advocacy. Engaging in projects with this focus provides students opportunities to make a difference in their community and to realize they have impact as citizens. When civic action and advocacy are the focus of service learning projects, it relates directly to the philosophy and organization of middle schools. It becomes experiential learning and connects the academic proceedings of the classroom with the real-world.

Boyte and Skelton (1997) related that schools were once civic centers connected to the communities they served. Schools now, they suggest, are dominated by disciplines and career preparation programs. Boyte and Skelton advocate a return to a work-centered perspective like service learning. Others also see the need to involve schools and students in civic action that strengthen democracy. A prime example was the signing in 1990 by President George Bush of the National and Community Service Act. At the base of this legislation was a recognition of a need to renew civic responsibility, involve young people in projects that benefit the nation, and to improve the live chances of youth.

This research has given a basic description of the phenomenon of service learning in Georgia's Middle Schools. There is still room for schools to incorporate service learning into the curriculum and expand opportunities for middle level students to engage in community service and to foster an array of self-development attributes.

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