

LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE ACTION RESEARCH ABSTRACT

KE Hones
NBTC Librarian
O'Connell High School

EMPOWERING TEENS THROUGH SERVICE LEARNING

Research shows that service learning activities have a positive impact on a student's personal development: teens are less likely to participate in at-risk behavior and have a more developed sense of social responsibility and citizenship skills. Teens also have opportunities to be active, positive contributors as they acquire academic skills. (From W.K. Kellogg Foundation Retrospective of K-12 Service-Learning Projects, 1990-2000. Denver, CO: RMC Research Corporation.)

"I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library." Jorge Luis Borges

Teacher Research

Fall 2004 I was selected to participate in a teacher leadership program sponsored by the SF Education Fund. As part of the Leadership Institute, I am investigating the following teacher research question: **What happens to student self-perception after having participated in a service program?** I have documented student involvement in planning, developing, facilitating, leading and evaluating programs. A baseline questionnaire asked students to respond to statements about self-esteem and peer, school and family connectedness. Students were asked to write personal definitions for these terms: Student leadership: *"open you ideas to others, take charge without having to be asked"* Student empowerment: *"a right for your voice", "standing up for more opportunities as students", "when a student is in charge of things"* Service learning: *"helping others learn, informing, volunteering... to do community service"* Environmental justice: *"where we seek to protect our environment", "justified action"*. Students also give oral and written feedback, evaluation and reflection during meetings, activities and events. Sample: *What did you do? How did you feel? What did you like best? What should we do next time?* **I hope to see positive growth in leadership, self-confidence, and skills transferable to academic success.**

"Imagination is the one weapon in the war against reality." Jules de Gaultier

Highlights of student created & coordinated programs

Since 1998, Teen Library Advisors (TLAs) have served O'Connell High School Library. TLAs help organize author visits, speakers and two book fairs each year. They help write grants and promote new materials by preparing displays, creating programs and themes for literacy events. TLAs plan the year at a day long retreat in the fall and participate in a daylong reflection program at the end of each year.

In the fall of 2002, Best Books for Young Adults Review Club (BBYAs) was co-sponsored by the O'Connell Library and San Francisco Public Library Teen Librarian Betsy Levine. BBYA students read and review new teen fiction and make recommendations to a national committee. Students share book critiques and comments during lunch meetings. BBYAs

booktalk new titles to classes and clubs, reading self selected books and creating a short presentation. As they give short, pithy “commercials” for books, they increase their oral skills, usually there is a waiting list for the titles that have been booktalked!

In January 2005, library students formed the Environmental Justice Teen Leaders (EJs). EJ students meet twice a month with the biology teacher and the librarian to learn about environmental justice issues and then plan action, activities and events for the school and community. They discuss and select speakers on environmental issues that will interest and educate fellow students. During a program featuring rescued parrots, the dean brought in a student who begged to attend ,saying he would do anything, even go to every class the rest of the day if he could see the parrots!.

“It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.” James Baldwin

Developing teen service learning projects

I focus on three important components when developing teen service learning programs: Youth Voice, Youth Leadership and Reflection

1. **Youth voice** includes the ideas, opinions, involvement and initiatives of teens. Students take responsibility for planning, decision-making, problem solving and assessing what they do and what they learned. Emphasis is placed on respecting different perspectives. All ideas are considered and discussed: do they match our goals and will they benefit students, schools and communities?

During a daylong retreat, at the beginning of the school year, TLAs develop themes, ideas and activities for several annual literacy events, including Banned Book Week, Teen Read Week, Latino and African American Read Ins, Read Across America and two bookfairs. They plan for a variety of authors and library guest speakers. *Reflections after the fall retreat: Victor: “I really liked the group time. I feel like I contributed a lot.” Giovanni, “I liked today for many reasons, I like the food and the presentations, I also enjoyed all the ideas we came up with.”*

2. **Youth Leadership** starts with clear communication of the goals of the program, expectations of students and identifying roles and responsibilities. As students participate, they gain skills in many areas, especially literacy: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students cite favorite skill building activities: generating ideas and planning programs, presenting to adults, reading to little kids and writing grants. With each activity, students discuss evaluation, developing evaluation formats and analyze data gathered. Additionally for a service-learning group, it is important for students to have on-going support and guidance. This can be as basic as the written calendar or meeting agenda.

Environmental Justice Teen Leaders began in January 2005. During their first meeting, students filled out a pre-survey and wrote personal definitions for “student leadership”, “student empowerment”, “service learning” and “environmental justice.” A calendar of meeting dates was reviewed. Students brainstormed ideas for action, events and field trips. During the field trip to the Exploratorium, EJs provided service with written feedback on an

exhibit. We also walked to Crissy Field and the EJs learned about restoration efforts, history of San Francisco and environmental opportunities for youth. Many students had never been to Crissy Field. After the ranger tour, several students wrote that they learned important information about the environment and also about the history of San Francisco. Since their initial visit, students have attended several programs on youth environmental issues at Crissy Field on weekends. After visiting the California Academy of Science EJs gave a short presentation to the biology class.

I met Diane Conway in a bookstore and asked her if she would come for an author visit. I used grant funds to purchase copies of What Would You Do If You Had No Fear for 50 students. *Sergio: "I liked how you were nice but it didn't look like you were faking. I liked how you talked about yourself in an informative way...Thank you Diane for coming, it was nice. I think that was my favorite part of school that day."* *Ricardo: "I like that you would go to different places like juvenile halls and discuss your book. I could relate to what you are writing. I already started reading your book...You made me open my eyes and realize that there is a lot of things out for me in the world."* *Tania: "I know that it is very hard to speak in front of a crowd. I started reading the book and I really liked it, so thanks...I enjoyed going up to you and talking to you and you signing our books...what I learned was that making mistakes in writing really doesn't matter too much because you can correct and re-write it..."* *Mechanical: "I learned from you that even though you might be scared to face your fears, just face them cause if you don't then how would people know what you are thinking or how you feel about something."*

Diane Conway wrote, *"I want to thank you for the opportunity to talk to the students... The more I think about it, the more amazing it seems that they were so engaged. If I touched one student it will be worth it to me. I looked directly in each person's eyes as I was signing the book and I saw they were getting the message that they are unique and valuable...Thanks again for bringing me in. I won't forget it. Let me know if I can do anything in the future. '...I've thought about the students every day since I was there!"*

3. **Reflection** is a continuous, thoughtful process: before, during and after activity (not just a report on activities). With reflection activates students examine and evaluate their service learning roles and activities. Then they apply what they learn to future experiences.

For Poetry Month in April all three service learning groups organized schoolwide poetry slam events, every Thursday in the library! They asked different groups and clubs to participate and requested poetry books and journals as prizes. Many students asked, "When is the next poetry slam?" We had a final poetry slam the last day of school in response to their continual requests! *Gaby "In the Poetry Slam students have a chance to express themselves, the event should be repeated every year."*

Research on Service Learning

Service-learning approaches used in K-12 schools have been found in many studies to have positive impacts on students' academic achievement, civic engagement, career aspirations, and social/personal development. A comprehensive summary of the impacts from 1990-1999 may be found in Billig, S. (May 2000), Research on K-12 School-Based Service-Learning: The Evidence Builds, Phi Delta Kappan, 81, 9, pp. 658-664 and from 1980-1989 in Conrad, D. and Hedin, D.(1991), School-based Community Service: What We Know From Research and Theory, Phi Delta Kappan, 72, 10, pp. 743-749.

<http://www.servicelearning.org/article/archive/122/>

Reflection in service-learning has been called the “link that ties student experiences in the community to academic learning” (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 171)

Reflection in the service-learning field can be defined as “the use of creative and critical thinking skills to help prepare for, succeed in, and learn from the service experience, and to examine the larger picture and context in which the service occurs” (Toole & Toole, p. 100).

Reflection is an important means by which students integrate prior knowledge and experiences with new experiences to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills. As Bringle and Hatcher (1999) noted, “Experience becomes educative when critical reflective thought creates new meaning and leads to growth and the ability to take informed action” (p. 180).

A national study of 30 school-sponsored youth participation programs conducted by Conrad and Hedin in 1982 revealed that “the key factor in stimulating complex thinking and improving the problem-solving ability of students was the existence, regularity, and quality of a reflective component” (Conrad & Hedin, 1987, p. 40).

Learn and Serve America- resources for educators in developing and managing service-learning projects. There are forms, guidelines, and directories of programs, information about awards and scholarships, and other material. Service-learning combines school curriculum and community service through programs which help students develop practical skills and a sense of responsibility.. <http://www.learnandserve.org/>

Go Serv: Cesar Chavez Day Celebrated on March 31st, this California state holiday was established to honor the life and work of Latino labor leader Cesar E. Chavez.- resources to promote service-learning activities commemorating Cesar Chavez, including a statewide program directory, curriculum materials for educators.
<http://www.goserv.ca.gov/ccd/ccd.asp>

Located in the heart of the Mission, O’Connell is an urban, inner city school of 950 students age 14-18; 79.1% Latino, 10.7% African American, 7.4% Asian American and Native American. 35 students are identified GATE, 20% as Special Education and 75% as eligible for free and reduced lunch. Our school is ranked underperforming
The original school and library were destroyed in the Loma Prieta Earthquake in 1988. After 11 years in a “temporary” facility, we moved to a new school in 1999. The current library collection is 95% new since 1998 and has fewer than nine books per student. There are 25-35 students per class, with high absenteeism.
We have used state funds, site money and extensive grant writing to increase the collection of books, videos, books on tape, periodicals, CDs, DVDs, electronic database subscriptions and 30 iMac wireless computers. We have materials in English and Spanish.