

## Service learning gains momentum

Towards the end of last century educational literature began to document the rise of service learning and its affects on student learning. Today there are some questions well answered in the literature and some that are still to be concluded.

### Social and behavioural

It would seem that service learning has a number of origins with a different purpose. For some service learning was to use community work to reconnect socially alienated people to other people and communities and not always their own community. This approach often supplemented by group and individual counselling and the setting of specific achievement goals has a strong history of success especially with behaviourally disordered students. As a result, some specialist schools and programs within some schools target these students with a program of service learning that is usually, but not always, outside school time. One of the premises is that students engaged with their community are more likely to value learning and see purpose in their schooling.

### Extra curricula

Other schools, mainly in the non-government sector in Australia, have sought to capitalise on the social benefits of service learning to provide students with a more community oriented approach to life in which serving others is seen as a priority. In this approach students have been required to become involved in an extra curricula activity that was aimed at benefiting someone else in the community. It could involve charity work, working with a service organisation or community volunteers. Some schools have added a service learning component to excursion, especially when students travel overseas. By working in another community, students learn about that community and develop relationships with the people. Students develop a sense of personal fulfilment and individual worth by helping others.

### Co-curricula

Schools have increasingly realised the benefits of service learning to the overall approach of students to their learning. Fulfilling goals beyond their own personal needs and the close connection with the community assist students to develop purpose and motivation for their own learning. In this way, service learning helps students to achieve curriculum learning outcomes.

Increasingly schools are looking to find timetable space for service learning. It is often seen as cross-curricula and teachers supervising service learning programs in high schools can be drawn from across the school. In primary schools, teachers have attempted to link service learning with broader education objectives. It is in these situations that service learning has taken on its own pedagogy and methodologies with statements like: *students are engaged in tasks that stretch them cognitively and developmentally; student voice is maximised in selecting, designing, implementing and evaluating the service project; student reflection takes place before, during and after service that include higher order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation and/or problem solving as a way to understand the service activity.* (Research on K-12 school-based service learning. *The evidence that builds*, Billig S H Research Corporation Denver, Colorado 2000)

School are looking for broader education outcomes from this approaches to service learning and believe the pedagogy employed is essential to successful learning across the curriculum. To provide a focus for this pedagogy service learning can find its own space in the school week.

### **Curriculum-based**

While the literature is very strong on the benefits of service learning for the social and behavioural development of individuals and impacts that the fully embraced pedagogy can have for learning across the curriculum, there is less certainty about the use of service learning to achieve curriculum learning outcomes within the disciplines. The research question that arises is can service learning, used as a teaching approach for a specific subject within the curriculum, achieve the learning outcomes for that subject?

Anecdotally, one would say yes, given the pedagogy represents good teaching, but are there other impediments such as the amount of content to be covered and the time needed for service learning that make it less efficient in achieving curriculum outcomes? Are there school organisational issues and where are the explicit links to curriculum outcomes?

Within NSW Department of Education and training there is some attempt to answer these questions by focusing on the most obvious curriculum link - civics and citizenship. Located mainly within the K-6 HSIE and Years 7-10 History and Geography Syllabuses civics and citizenship education provides a good fit context for service learning. As part of an Australian Government Quality Teacher Program two cluster of schools are being asked to develop a sequence of civics and citizenship activities over Years 5-9 and to include a focus on service learning and student decision making. The interest is in whether or to what extent the service learning can achieve the learning outcomes in HSIE.

The literature suggests that *to achieve stronger academic outcomes, program designs must include intentional integration with specific subject matter in the curriculum, alignment with standards and reflection activities that include higher order thinking skills such as evaluation, and/or problem solving as a way to understand the service activity and its relationship to society/community need.*

In addition, the DET project is asking the question: how is student achievement of curriculum learning outcomes assessed within a service learning context.

### **Christian teachers and service learning.**

Obviously Christians are going to be attracted to service learning because serving others is a basic element of what it means to be a Christian. In a selfish world focused on wealth accumulation and the rights of the individual, many have lamented the loss of community within our suburbs leading for many to loneliness for older people and alienation for younger people. It's probably the most radical of Jesus teaching, the parable of the good Samaritan, that bring a rationale for service learning for Christians. However, the rationale is not enough, service learning requires action and here the Christian acts out of thankfulness to God for everything that has been done in Christ. Because we are forgiven, saved from the penalty of sin and accepted as children of God we want to say thank you with our lives. Service to others holds particular attractions for Christians.

Some of the difficult questions for Christians are:

- Should schools be the focus of service learning?
- Is service learning really serving self-interest with secondary benefits to the wider community?
- Is there anything specifically Christian about service learning if it is not conducted by Christians and with an explicit focus on revealing Christ?

- Should I as a Christian teacher promote and/or support service learning in my school?

There are no easy answers here. Some of the considerations might include whether you believe a focus on service learning:

- would break down individualism and provide a greater community focus which would allow the Christian message to have more penetration and impact
- provides greater contact with and support for Christian service organisations
- makes people more aware of the needs of others and how Christians attempt to meet these needs
- provides individual Christian teachers with greater opportunity to demonstrate service and be explicit about their motivation for service.

Schools exist primarily to develop individuals to contribute to the future of our society and both the common good and the common wealth. The learning that a society believes young people need is primarily located in the broad objectives of education and the required curriculum. Balancing broad objectives and curriculum-based learning outcomes has always been the concern of schools. Service learning is yet another approach that could challenge whole school approaches to school improvement and pose the same question about balance.

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