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Gifted Child Quarterly 2003; 47; 295

DOI: 10.1177/001698620304700406

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<http://gcq.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/47/4/295>

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Effects of Service Learning on Young, Gifted Adolescents and Their Community

Alice W. Terry

Kennesaw State University

ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of the Community Action service learning project, part of the Learn and Serve America program, on gifted adolescents and their community. Using a case study design, the author investigates this service learning project grounded in creative problem solving. The importance of service learning to the participants is highlighted in the following themes that emerged from the data: instructional methodology, student development, attitudes, empowerment, commitment, and effects of celebration. A service learning typology based on levels of service and learning is referenced. The author examines connections to the Future Problem Solving Program and discusses the implications for further research, the education of the gifted, and the community.

Imagine being able to distinguish a Corinthian column from an Ionic or Doric column. Imagine knowing the difference between Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, and Colonial Revival. Now imagine being able to distinguish these things at the age of eleven or twelve. With the motto, "helping [Horton] is our concern," 28 students at [Horton] County Middle School are taking their town by storm. Dubbing themselves the [Horton's] Helpers, these 7th grade gifted students have become experts on the history and architecture of their small town, and they are taking their expertise to the streets. (Joiner, 1999, p. 1)

Imagine indeed. Involved in a service learning project that transformed both the students and their community, the students of Horton County Middle School demonstrated the power and potential of service learning as an effective curriculum for the gifted.

Background on Service Learning

In the early 1900s, William James promoted the idea of national service through a nonmilitary, government-sponsored program in which all young men would be con-

scripted into service to work in foundries, fishing fleets, and coal mines. In 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps was initiated in the U.S. by Franklin D. Roosevelt to pull the country out of the Great Depression. Over three million unemployed young men served their country building bridges, national parks, and buildings until the program ended in 1942 (Wade, 1997).

Throughout the 1930s, Progressives like John Dewey stressed that schools should incorporate the values of social

PUTTING THE RESEARCH TO USE

Discovering a rigorous, differentiated curriculum that has strong affective and process components while also helping to sensitize gifted students to community problems and needs can be difficult for teachers of the gifted. This study provides support for such a curriculum: Community Action service learning. It illustrates that service learning can be effective as a curriculum for young, gifted adolescents by involving them in activities centered around individual interests and talents and by connecting them to real-world situations that lead to authentic learning. The findings of this study relate to other successful curricular approaches for the gifted that illustrate the importance of centering on students, accentuating their strengths, and valuing their interests. In addition to connecting to all of the elements of Renzulli's Type III enrichment activities, these findings point to a higher level, perhaps a Type IV experience. Students involved in this highest level of service learning go far beyond the presentation stage; they have a direct impact on not only a real audience, but on their community, as well. Examination of this study may provide gifted educators with ideas for implementing their own service learning project that will help provide a differentiated curriculum for their gifted students, as well as make a positive difference in their own communities.

reform and emphasize social and cooperative activities. William Kilpatrick encouraged connecting schools to community service in the waning years of World War II. He strongly urged that learning take place in settings outside classroom walls and involve efforts to meet real community needs (Conrad & Hedin, 1991).

Connecting schools to community service is widely known today as *service learning*. Service learning is a method by which students learn and develop through curricular integration and active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that address actual needs in their community. Providing structured time for students to think, talk, or write about what they did and observed during a service activity, service learning also provides opportunities for participants to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities. These activities enhance teaching in school by extending student learning into the community and helping to foster a sense of caring for others (Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform, 1993).

The first service learning legislation was signed into law in November 1990 by President George Bush. This legislation, the National and Community Service Act of 1990, created the Commission on National and Community Service. In 1993, President Bill Clinton championed the National and Community Service Trust Act, which created the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Service learning has achieved prominence in the national educational agenda in recent years. One of the objectives established under the third National Education Goal for 2000 included U.S. students being involved in community service activities (Kleiner & Chapman, 1999). The fact that service learning has been supported by liberals and conservatives alike is reflective of the interest it generates.

Classifications of Service Learning

Over the last 20 years, classifications or typologies for service learning have been identified. The primary K–12 service learning typologies developed thus far are generally defined by two key structural dimensions: (a) the degree to which service is integrated within the school curriculum and (b) the institution where the program is located and managed (Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Furco, 1994).

A K–12 developmental service learning typology (Terry & Bohnenberger, 1999) addresses the differences between service learning activities based on differing levels of student learning and service to the community. Like

a thermometer, the degrees or levels of service and learning are developmental, varying on a continuum, rather than being defined by sharply delineated points (see Figure 1). This typology is an inclusive model that recognizes not only direct service, but indirect service to the community, as well.

The initial degree of involvement, *Community Service*, involves students in volunteering in their community and increasing their awareness of the community. The next level, *Community Exploration*, involves not only awareness, but exploration and engagement. It can include activities that have always been associated with experiential education, but not always with service learning, such as internships or outdoor/environmental education programs. The highest level on the service learning continuum, *Community Action*, involves students not only becoming aware of, exploring, and becoming engaged in their community, but also having students make a positive impact on their community (see Figure 1).

What Should the Role of the School Be in Meeting the Needs of the Gifted?

According to Passow (1995), the school is the catalyst for both talent identification and talent development; therefore, its function is not only to design and implement learning opportunities within the classroom, but also to identify learning resources and opportunities in the community, which should be integrated with those of the classroom. Torrance (1979) stated that education should help students see clear relationships between what they are expected to learn in school and in their lives outside of school, both in the present and in the future.

For creative thinking to occur and to continue to occur, there must be ample opportunity for one thing to lead to another and to do something with the information encountered. Therefore, it is inevitable that any genuine encouragement of creative thinking in schools and colleges must take students beyond the classroom, textbook, and the teacher. (Torrance & Safter, 1990, p. 11)

Unfortunately, schools do not often provide gifted students with opportunities beyond the classroom, the textbook, or the teacher. According to Reis and Renzulli (1992), a serious problem our schools face is the lack of curricular differentiation and academic challenge for our most able students. And how has curricula for gifted students been differentiated? According to Passow (1989), we still organize our curricula for the gifted by subjects even though we recognize that most problems involve interdisciplinary study. He promoted curricula with strong affective and process components, which also complement cognitive components.

K-12 Developmental Service Learning Typology

Learning Arrows: directional arrows signifying the degree of learning—increasing as it moves toward the pinnacle
Service Circles: illustrate the extent of direct service to the community by the student
Side Arrows: symbolize the flow of interaction between the community and the school
Thermometer: a continuum depicting the degree of the combined service and learning experience



Community Action: Interaction between school and community flows in both directions producing greater impact in the community and greater empowerment in the students. Community Action involves the highest degree of service, which can have far-reaching outcomes in the community and the highest degree of learning.

Community Exploration: Interaction between the school and community can go in either direction—students go out into the community or elements of the community come into the school. Community Exploration does not necessarily involve direct service to the community although it may involve a high degree of learning.

Community Service: Interaction between school and community goes one way—from the school to community. Community Service involves a high degree of service to the community with a lesser degree of learning.

Figure 1. Developmental typology or model for service learning which consists of three levels that distinguish levels of service and learning and are correlated to Piaget’s cognitive developmental stages and Bradley’s levels of reflection.

Research Findings on Service Learning

Research findings on the effects of service learning on youth are mixed due in part to the wide range of service learning activities being studied and the differing research methods used from study to study. Conrad and Hedin (1989), pioneers in service learning research, concluded that quality community service learning programs have positive effects on youth. In their seminal study, they found gains in social and personal responsibility, including improvement of students’ self-esteem, self-motivation, risk taking, ability to solve real-life problems, responsibil-

ity for their own learning, responsibility to a group or class, and concern for fellow human beings. They also found that the length or duration of the activities has an impact on student outcomes, with those of longer duration having greater impacts. The greater impacts, however, were not found for projects lasting over 18 weeks (Conrad & Hedin, 1981).

Some studies have found that students involved in service learning activities attain a better sense of social competence in communicating (Conrad & Hedin, 1981; Newmann & Rutter, 1989), while other studies have found that more favorable attitudes toward adults and organiza-

tions emerge, with students gaining in both personal (Hamilton & Fenzel, 1987) and intellectual development (Conrad & Hedin). Personal development can reference leadership skills, self-efficacy, self-confidence, maturity, organizational skills, increased awareness, and creative skills.

Advocates of service learning do not, unfortunately, have much of a research base to support the effectiveness of their programming (National Commission on Service Learning, 2002a). Studies have suffered from lack of adequate measurement instruments due to the complexity of service learning (Conrad & Hedin, 1981), the possible effects of previous volunteer experience (Conrad & Hedin, 1981; Hamilton & Fenzel, 1987), the lack of a conceptual framework by which studies can be identified (Conrad & Hedin, 1981; Newman & Rutter, 1989), and the uneven quality of students' experiences (Conrad & Hedin, 1981, 1989). One omission in service learning research is the examination of the effects of service learning on special populations, with the rare exception of at-risk youth.

Generally speaking, service learning has been perceived as a *one-size-fits-all* educational method, which has produced findings that only confuse educators who are trying to determine effective programming for their students. This is especially true for gifted educators who seek to involve their students in a rigorous and challenging curriculum. The present study was undertaken in order to determine the effectiveness of a high level of service learning in meeting the educational needs of young, gifted adolescents.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of young, gifted adolescents involved in a service learning project in a rural school in northeast Georgia and develop a comprehensive and detailed account of the phenomenon under study in addition to an explanation of why it worked or failed. This study attempted to determine the possible effects of an advanced level of service learning, Community Action, on the students and the community. In particular, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What were the students' perceptions about their participation?
2. How did participation in service learning impact students?
3. How did the service learning project impact the community?

4. How did the instructional methodology used influence the students' experiences?

A qualitative case study design was selected to allow others to understand the meanings people have constructed—how they make sense of their world (Merriam, 1998). This case study was bounded by (a) Horton County Middle School in Horton, GA; (b) an advanced type of service learning project, Community Action, that was part of a Learn and Serve America grant during the 1999–2000 school year in Georgia; and (c) Georgia-identified gifted students participating in a differentiated curriculum that incorporated service learning and was taught by a certified teacher of the gifted for one segment per day during the 1998–2000 school years. Pseudonyms are used in the study in order to provide confidentiality for the participants.

Description of the Setting and Program

Horton County Middle School, located in rural northeast Georgia, was selected as the site. The only middle school in Horton County, it serves students in grades 6–8. In 1999, the student population of the school was approximately 773, and the ethnicity breakdown of the school was 71.4% White, 27.7% African American, .5% Hispanic, and .4% Asian. Forty-four percent of the school's population received free or reduced lunch. There were 253 students enrolled in the sixth grade during the 1998–1999 school year. Characteristic of most gifted programs, African American students were underrepresented. The African American population of the school was approximately 28%, yet the identified African American gifted population for the sixth grade was only 10%. The students were taught by a certified teacher of the gifted for one period per day in a reading skills course during the first year of the project and in a course entitled "Academic Enrichment" during the second year. The primary focus of the class for both years was academic enrichment, rather than core content.

Horton's Helpers (28 identified gifted students) became involved in a service learning project in the fall of 1998 after first examining the problems that existed in the community. The students selected the project using the creative problem solving (CPS) method, first identifying problems within their community in general and then narrowing the list to address one problem they decided to try to resolve. Their service learning project involved partnering with the city of Horton to encourage people to frequent the downtown area in order to build up business and to encourage an appreciation of its historical structures. In the fall of 1998, Horton's Helpers decorated the down-

town square; sponsored the Main Street Monster Mash, a carnival event that brought trick-or-treaters to the downtown area on Halloween for treats and fun activities; and helped with the annual tree lighting ceremony. In November 1999, the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) asked the students to create a float for the traditional Christmas parade.

Over the course of the project, the students researched historic buildings, homes, and monuments in Horton and designed a walking tour of the area, which included 24 stops. In addition to the walking tours, the students designed brochures for self-guided tours, eventually putting them on CD-ROM for easy use and reference. They designed an impressive bulletin board for their school with pictures and historic information about the structures on their tour and then placed flyers and notices around the community inviting people to come on a guided tour they conducted. They also shared this information with the community through formal presentations at civic organizations' meetings.

Participants and Selection Procedures

The teacher who facilitated the project, Ms. Smith, was selected due to her commitment to, and expertise in orchestrating, Community Action service learning with young, gifted adolescents. This made her and her students ideal, information-rich participants. Five students were selected to participate in the focus group interview from the various groups involved in the project. A representative number of boys and girls were selected (i.e., two boys and three girls).

Six students were chosen for individual interviews based on maximum variation purposeful sampling techniques (Patton, 1990). The criteria for selection were race, gender, role in the project, and confirming and disconfirming or negative experiences. In addition to interviews conducted with the selected students, individual interviews were also conducted with parents of three of the students to gain insight into the effects of the project on the children from their parents' perspective. Parents who were representative of the student group were selected: one parent of an African American student (Latoya); one parent of a confirming, female member (Cathy); and one parent of a disconfirming, male member (Aaron).

In order to ascertain the impact of the project on the school and the community, the principal, Mr. Gulley, and two community members were interviewed. Ms. Fitzpatrick, one of the community leaders, was a storeowner and a member of the DDA and was directly

involved with the students and the project. The other community member, Ms. Wolfe, was the Main Street coordinator of Horton.

Data Collection

The methods of data collection were interviews, observations, and documents. The researcher conducted two types of interviews: individual and focus group. Guided, in part, by flexibly worded questions, the focus group interview was exploratory and used an unstructured format. For instance, students were asked what it was like for them to work on the project. They were asked to relate how the class was set up to work on the project. The focus group interviews provided insight into important issues of the project and the class organization.

The types of questions that were used in the individual student interviews were semistructured, following a conversational format, with some specific, closed-ended questions such as: If you had to put a check by how much you learned in the project, do you think would check,

- I have learned as much in the Horton's Helpers class than in a more traditional class.
- I have learned more in the Horton's Helpers class than in the more traditional class.
- I have not learned as much in the Horton's Helpers class as in a more traditional class.

More open-ended questions were also asked, such as "If a friend of yours had the chance to be part of a community project like this, what advice would you give him or her?" and "Some people might say that Ms. Smith [the teacher] is doing the work, not you. How would you respond to that?" The purpose of these questions was to determine the students' roles in the project and the impact participation in the project had on them. Semistructured interviews were also conducted with the teacher of the service learning project, the principal of the school, three parents, and two community members in order to gain deeper insight into the effects of this experience.

The researcher conducted three observations during the study. Observations were carried out on each of Ms. Smith's two Horton's Helpers classes during the first year of the project. Since this study investigated the role of instructional methodology, it was important to conduct the observations in the classroom where the instruction was taking place. The final observation was conducted on Ms. Smith's Horton's Helpers class during the second year of the project. The observation was systematic, which involved writing descriptively, "practicing the disciplined recording of field notes; knowing how to separate detail

from trivia . . . and using rigorous methods to validate observations” (Patton, 1990, p.201). Since the researcher was trained in this research procedure, the information attained from this form of data collection was beneficial to the study. As an outsider, the researcher was able to notice things that may be routine to the participants themselves, which led to a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 1998). During the observations, the role of the teacher, the students, and the actual content of the class itself were examined. As little interaction as possible took place between the students or the teacher and the researcher during the observations. Detailed and descriptive field notes were taken during the observations, which included bits of conversations and both descriptive and analytical remarks about what was observed. The observations lasted for 50 minutes each, the length of the entire class period.

Documents were collected to aid in clarifying and triangulating the emergent findings. Newspaper and magazine articles, a scrapbook, a project board, student writings, Learn and Serve America documents, a video, a six-page report about the project, and other documents that surfaced during the study were examined.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. After the transcriptions were completed, feedback was obtained by taking information back to the informants so they could judge the accuracy and credibility of the account (Creswell, 1998).

The constant comparative method was used in the analysis of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using NUD*IST to manage the data, the researcher initially carried out open coding on all data collected. Coding is a system for both organizing and managing data that involves assigning shorthand designations to various aspects of the data in order to retrieve specific pieces of it (Merriam, 1998). Next, the researcher carried out axial coding on the data, analyzing the interviews, field notes, and observations together, looking for categories that cut across all sets of data. The categories were then merged and a newly defined, experimental logic diagram was developed from which six tentative categories or themes emerged.

Validity and Reliability

The applied nature of inquiries in education makes it imperative that confidence exists in conducting the investigation and in the results of a particular study.

Determining the validity and reliability of a qualitative study, according to Merriam (1998), involves examination of its component parts, as it does in other types of research. How do these research findings match reality? How trustworthy are the findings? These are questions that speak to internal validity in research. Internal validity hinges on the meaning the researcher makes of the reality he or she observes.

The strategies used to enhance internal validity during this study were triangulation; maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990); member checks; long-term observation; peer review of all aspects of data collection and analysis by the researcher’s doctoral committee; clarification of assumptions, worldview, and theoretical orientation of the researcher (Merriam, 1998); and maintenance of a clear audit trail. Multiple and different sources to provide corroborating evidence and to confirm emergent findings were used (Merriam; Creswell, 1998). An audit trail was established in this study through detailed accounting of how the data were collected and analyzed.

Not being impartial when it comes to service learning and having been involved with Community Action service learning activities for over 16 years as a teacher, the researcher was aware of the need to address the issue of researcher bias at the outset of the study. Some of her students were featured in *Reader’s Digest* and others appeared on *The Phil Donahue Show* because of their outstanding work in service learning.

The primary limitation of this and all case studies is the question of representativeness and consideration for how valid the case study is for subsequent generalization in the field—the external validity of the study. This question of generalizability has plagued qualitative researchers for years. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have suggested that dependability and reliability in qualitative research not be based on outsiders getting the same results, but rather on outsiders concurring that, given the data collected, the results make sense. In other words, they are dependable and consistent.

To enhance external validity in this study, the following procedures were followed:

- Rich, thick description was used so that the readers would be able to determine how closely this case could be matched to their own situation. In other words, how transferable are the results?
- Typicality or modal categorization was used to describe how typical the program is compared to others that are similar (Merriam, 1998).

This study focused on one rural middle school in an area in northeast Georgia. It documented the instructional

methodology used in the service learning project and the effect of a certain type of service learning model, Community Action, on students and on the community. Therefore, the study provides an in-depth look at a service learning project carried out by gifted students in just one middle school in a rural area situated in a Southern state. Transferability may be limited as a result.

Findings

Six themes emerged from this study: instructional methodology, attitudes, student development, empowerment, commitment, and effects of celebration. Instructional methodology proved to be very important. Aspects of instructional methodology such as working cooperatively, using creative problem solving techniques, and the “cognitive apprenticeship” framework, impacted the development of the other areas. The development of attitudes and student development seemed to enhance the students’ empowerment within the classroom setting. The development of attitudes, student development, and empowerment within the class led to commitment both to the project and the community. Celebration, represented in this project by participation in the International Future Problem Solving Program, enhanced attitudes, student development, and commitment. These relationships among the categories are depicted graphically in Figure 2.

Instructional Methodology

The instructional methodology implemented in the classroom impacted both the project and the students. The teacher structured each class around the cognitive apprenticeship model. The process used by the students during the implementation of the project was the creative problem solving process, which they carried out in a rudimentary way in self-selected cooperative groups. Reflection, a key ingredient in any type of experiential education, was sidestepped for the most part due to time constraints.

The cognitive apprenticeship model (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989) was the hub around which the instructional methodology existed. This model includes four elements that lead to learning: scaffolding, modeling, coaching, and fading. This model can be described as a handholding method that leads a student from dependence to independence in learning. It proved important because it guided the students in becoming self-learners as they constructed their own learning experiences by working cooperatively in their selected groups.

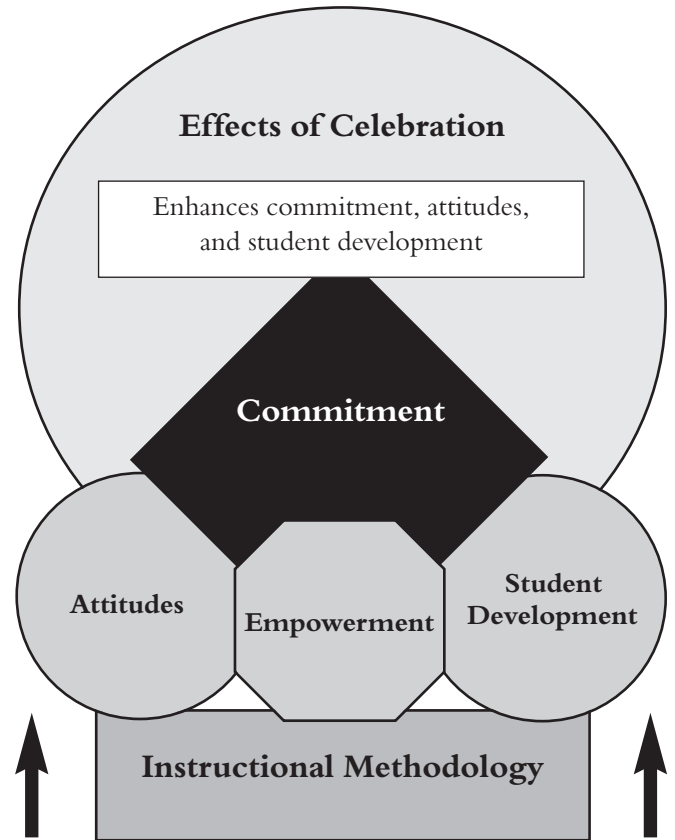


Figure 2. This figure illustrates the relationship between the emergent findings with instructional methodology impacting the development of all other areas. Attitudes and student development enhanced student empowerment and these three categories led to commitment. Celebration enhanced attitudes, student development, and commitment.

The teacher acted as facilitator of the project using this model. Not only were the classes student-run, they were also student-focused and student-led. Ms. Smith answered student questions and used inquiry method in directing them. During one class, she asked a student, “Well, what do you think you could do? Why don’t ya’ll [the group] talk about that and let me know when you come to some consensus?” This method of instruction empowered the students within the classroom, thereby assuring more commitment to the project and more positive attitudes toward the experience.

The Osborn-Parnes model of creative problem solving (Osborn, 1963; Parnes, 1967) was used during this service learning project. Using the model, the students identified their problem and ultimately enacted the solutions they contrived. The students in this study, however, were not skilled at the creative problem solving process, as

it was their first experience using it. They seemed familiar with the divergent parts of the process, especially brainstorming. They were, however, unfamiliar with most of the terminology or the steps in the process and even less familiar with the more convergent parts of the process such as evaluating alternative solutions and planning to put solutions into use. The field notes reflected their lack of familiarity:

It's obvious to me that the students are loosely familiar with the CPS [creative problem solving] process. The terminology and the steps are unfamiliar to them. When they would say, "We did it this way, and this list came," I would ask them about the process, and they were clueless. And so I would say, "Have you ever heard the term brainstorming?" And lights went on, and they were more than able to elaborate on it: "Oh, yeah, oh yeah! We brainstorm, we put them [ideas] out and then we decide."

In service learning, reflection is viewed as the framework around which the students process and synthesize the information and ideas they have gleaned during their service learning activities (Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform, 1993). Little formal reflection was carried out during this project, which led to confusion. The students weren't exactly sure how all the pieces of the project fit together. Tabitha's comments are illustrative of this confusion.

[N]ow we are trying to get a CD-ROM, and we have to make up presentations for you, I think [it was not for me]. I'm not sure. I don't know who it is. But, we're making a presentation and scrapbooks or stuff, like, to send to somebody. The scrapbook people know who we're sending it to. I'm not a scrapbook person.

Reflection was pushed aside because, as the teacher admitted, there just wasn't enough time to get it all in. The lack of reflection prevented the students from developing a complete or complex understanding of their experience. Each student came away with an understanding of the experience; it was, however, not consistent from student to student, nor was it always consistent with the facts.

Attitudes

Attitudes played an important role in this service learning project. Attitudes that developed during the experience were a sense of accomplishment, respect both from and for the community, a sense of pride, and positive omnipresent attitudes.

There was consensus from both the students and the community that the community was very pleased with the partnership with the students and that it respected what the students had accomplished. Ms. Wolfe, the Main Street coordinator, noted that the involvement by students in the community educated them about their community and about ways that they can become directly involved in it.

One word seemed to sum up the students' attitudes toward this service learning project: *fun*. This word was found in all the student interviews—several times, in some cases. It was found in 18 documents and was referenced 91 times. Statements like "I didn't know learning about my hometown could be so fun" were pervasive in both the interviews and the documents.

Another word, *different*, recurred throughout the data. From describing the class, to explaining the various things they did during the project, the students saw this service learning experience as different. Latoya explained how differently the classroom operated: "In all our other classes, we have to sit down in our desk and, like, just work out of books and do worksheets. In Horton's Helpers class, like, you can, like, move around. It's an activity, and it's fun." Aaron added, "[I]t's just a different type of learning. Instead of just the same old, it's a type of mind-expanding thing. . . . We weren't just doing numbers . . . or trying to find adverbs or anything. It was just really an open-minded thing."

These attitudes combined with personal and social development and empowerment within the classroom furthered the students' commitment. Without their positive attitudes, it is doubtful that they would have felt as committed to the project.

Empowerment

During the observations, I became aware that the students were very independent and felt empowered to make decisions and take actions on their own without getting explicit approval from the teacher. Aaron said,

If we get lost, she'll [the teacher] put us in the right direction. She's kinda like the shepherd guiding the sheep, you know? She doesn't do the work, but, you know, if we get stuck, she'll put us in the right direction of what we're doing. But, we actually do the work.

The students did not perceive Ms. Smith as an authoritarian figure who told them what to do and how to do it. Approval from teachers is very important for some students, especially gifted perfectionists. As a teacher, it is easy to fall into the trap and make decisions for students even though you know you should not. Ms. Smith avoided this trap. She deliberately empowered the students in the classroom. She said the most important thing students get from a project like this is "being self-learners, teaching themselves. Sometimes, it's worth more than you can do anyway. They'll carry it longer; they'll remember it longer."

Though apparent that the students did the work in the classroom themselves, it was also apparent that they relied

on Ms. Smith to set the agenda for them. Cathy, one of the student facilitators of the project, recognized that they were allowed, even encouraged, to make decisions about the project. She was also aware that sometimes they did not have the skills to make those decisions. Never having been exposed to the creative problem solving process prior to this experience and never having been empowered by a teacher in a classroom before, the students didn't understand how to apply the process in order to overcome these problems. As a result, they needed more guidance. According to Cathy, "Ms. Smith said that this was our project. We should be deciding what to do with it. . . . But, she helped us with it because we were often stumped because we were new to the [creative problem solving] process and everything."

Becoming empowered in the community, being treated *like an adult*, has been found to be important to students involved in a Community Action service learning project (Terry, 2000). Empowerment in the classroom did not, however, carry over into empowerment in the community for these students. When the students were probed concerning how they responded when they found out that the event that they cared so much about, the Monster Mash, was cancelled in the second year of the project, they stared back with blank expressions. Empowerment during this service learning project seemed to stop at the school doors. The students, though impacting their community in a positive way, did not attain a sense of empowerment within the community. As one of the focus group participants said, "Probably we could make more difference than grownups could." The word *probably* points to the hesitation the students felt concerning their lack of empowerment in the community.

In addition to insufficient skills in problem solving, the students had few opportunities for formal reflection during the project. This led to students who were willing to help, but who did not feel empowered to make a difference outside their perceived bounds.

Student Development

Student development was an important outgrowth of involvement in this service learning project. The areas of development included academic, intellectual, personal, social, and creative.

The students considered this project helpful to them both academically and developmentally. They unanimously agreed that they had learned more in the Horton's Helpers class than they would have learned in a regular classroom. The *more* in academic development referred to

knowledge about their community, computer technology, career development, architecture, how to conduct interviews, and how to do oral presentations.

Cooperative learning was very evident. Whereas most classrooms function with students sitting in desks working in solitude, the Horton's Helpers classroom was active. It was alive. It thrived on social interaction between students. In the words of one of the students, "Mainly, we work together to figure out, like, what we're supposed to do." Each group worked very effectively together. In addition to promoting learning, cooperative learning also enhanced social development.

What the students perceived about their community was profound. They began to discern new meaning in the term *community* and to value involvement in it, both "seeing" the town's history and taking pride in it. Aaron expressed that he "saw the history of the place," which, in turn, gave him a different view of the town. His mother expressed that participation in the project made Horton more real and personal to Aaron, who learned that "it's [the community] not just going to fix itself." He stated,

I thought a community would be fine by itself, and then, after getting into this, it's like, I didn't realize how much it really needs. At the cemetery, a lot of the tombstones and everything are just decaying away—[there will] come a time when you won't even be able to tell—we'd be losing our history. Our history is there.

The students became very knowledgeable about their community, its history, and its architecture. It wasn't, however, just knowledge that these students acquired. They *experienced* their community. Instead of just reading words in the pages of a book, they learned experientially. They learned about the architecture by actually going to examine it. They walked down the halls of buildings where people from the cemetery had walked many, many years before. According to Aaron, they did not "just learn what's out there . . . by just looking to see a building, but to see what it is, what its history is." The knowledge they acquired should stay with them long past a final exam.

This was a positive experience for the Horton's Helpers, even the two with learning difficulties. Aaron, a small, wiry, fast-talking member of the Horton's Helpers and one of the disconfirming participants, surprised Ms. Smith with how positive he was about the project. The field notes are reflective of Aaron's presence in the classroom.

[Ms. Smith] begins talking to group—one boy [Aaron] asks, "When are we doing reading? This is a reading class, huh?"

Ms. [Smith]: "You know this is a reading skills class, but we don't do that specifically."

[Aaron] starts singing out loud, being disruptive.

Ms. [Smith]: "[Aaron], stop that!"

And [Aaron] responds, "I'm just singing!" [Aaron is] not listening—sitting with knee in desk—begins humming again.

Though not officially diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD), Aaron exhibited its characteristics. He had been homeschooled through fourth grade, and his mother expressed that, had he been in school, he probably would have been on Ritalin as early as kindergarten. The freedom of the class definitely appealed to this energetic, young boy. But, did he actually learn anything from the experience? According to his mother,

I felt like it was a very good growing, a maturing experience, another level of understanding and maturity having gone through that [the Horton's Helpers project]. I have seen it in him and his feelings towards his community.

David had been diagnosed with AD/HD and also with mild Tourette Syndrome. He took medication for AD/HD. Selected as a confirming participant because of his devotion to the project, during both observations of David, he was the most intense student in the class. He was very convincing when he shared that he had learned more in this class than in any other:

[Y]ou not only learn school stuff, but you learn more about Horton than just about anyone else in Horton would probably know unless they've lived here all their life. But, we get to walk around. They, some people from the library, come with us and tell us about the styles of the houses, who lived there, how long it's been since somebody has lived in it and the name of the house before someone else had lived in it. So, I think we've learned more, or I know I have.

According to his mother, "If he's really interested in something, he'll get really engrossed in it." Wondering if he was always as focused in all his classes, his mother, referencing trips to visit teachers in classes where his performance was not stellar, declared that he was not.

A surprising finding was how different this service learning experience was for the African American students. Latoya recognized that she had experienced the project differently:

I'm like the only Black girl in there. . . . When I first came, it was kinda different because I didn't have any friends, 'cause I was kinda shy in my other classes, you know? And, but, we kinda get closer, and now I think our experiences are the same now. . . . We're all pretty, uh, equal now.

Latoya had been in the gifted program with most of these students since the third grade. It would seem that she never felt "equal" until her involvement in the Horton's Helpers.

Bryan, also African American, shared a similar experience. He stated, "But, you know, they [Horton's Helpers] treated you equal like your brothers and sisters would. That's why, one of the reasons I like being in the

Horton's Helpers, 'cause of the respect you get from the other members." Bryan and Latoya were the only two students who used the word *equal* during the interviews. They were also the only African American students interviewed.

These African American students indicated that their involvement in the primarily White community of the downtown area was important. Latoya, who said she had never attended a Christmas parade in the community before her participation in the project, expressed that she enjoyed her participation in the community and that it would impact where she lived in her future.

[I]t's way out there in the country [where she now resides], so we haven't really come [sic] through this part, the main Horton. But, then I see that, when I grow up, I kinda want to live in, like, Horton, not the Horton County area. 'Cause [sic] we never really came to the events on the square . . . to the parades and stuff . . . but, then when I got to Horton's Helpers, like, I see how fun—I used to think this boring, but I think that's really going to change the way I, the way I want to live when I get to be an adult.

She wanted to live in the city, a place she had never considered living before, a place mainly occupied by Whites in this rural area of Georgia. This raises an exciting possibility: Could working in close cooperation with others toward a goal in the community help to bridge the chasm that still exists between the races in the rural South?

Commitment

The students expressed commitment to their project, their community, and to the Horton's Helpers as a group. Learning more about their community led to a commitment to the community both now and in the future. Involvement in the project itself furthered commitment by instilling in the students the value of perseverance.

Why were they committed? According to Ms. Smith, it was because they were the ones who chose the project. As people dig deeper into a problem, look at the issues from many sides, and try to find a solution beyond the obvious, they create greater commitment and emotional involvement (Torrance, Murdock, & Fletcher, 1996). This is exactly what these students did.

According to Tabitha, "[W]e learn probably more in that classroom because it teaches us, you know, that you can't do something and then quit." Bryan echoed, "[T]here might be a few setbacks, so you have to try to stick with it and not give up."

Personal and social development intensified commitment because, as growth in areas such as self-development, understandings, and perspectives occurred, the students became more skilled and more confident. Commitment

developed for these students in part because they felt more capable of performing the tasks as the project evolved.

Through their participation in service learning, the students began to see outside the walls of their classroom into the community beyond. As their community horizons expanded, their appreciation of their community grew. Basic skills were propped up, while the students' sense of responsibility toward their community developed and their relationships with each other grew. Ms. Fitzpatrick, the DDA member, pointed out the importance of early commitment to the community when she stated,

I think that the general perception of students is . . . they don't have great involvement in their community other than their school program. And I think, if we can teach them at this age to become involved and what volunteerism and community involvement can mean, I think they're going to carry that through to adulthood and I think we'll get more community involvement.

How will this project affect future community involvement for these students? According to Cathy, "I know more about my community so I like my community more, and it gives me a reason to stay involved. I probably won't be as involved as I am now, but I hope to stay involved as I get older." Echoing Cathy's statement, Tabitha added, "I'll probably be involved with the community [in the future] because I've had this experience now."

Effects of Celebration

Celebration in service learning is the use of multiple methods to acknowledge, celebrate, and further validate students' service work (Toole, Conrad, & Nelson, 1998). In this service learning project, participation in the International Future Problem Solving Program provided the celebratory experience. The students won a berth to the international competition at the University of Michigan after the first year of the project.

This service learning competition helped to motivate the students and verify to both the community and to them that what they were doing was important. It was fun and exciting for the students, offering them new experiences in life. It provided a learning experience through interaction with students from other parts of the country and other parts of the world, as well as deepened existing relationships among the students themselves. Celebration also helped to validate the students' efforts in the community, although it was in no way the driving force behind their commitment to the project. As Cathy related, "It [participation in the competition] lets you know how good you're doing on your project, but it's not the only reason

you do your project. But, it's good to see that someone likes it and that it's making a difference."

This experience seemed pivotal in Bryan's life, especially in establishing deeper relationships with his fellow Helpers. In his characteristically warm demeanor, he stated,

[A]nd our experience in Michigan, you know, I, I mean, I know these people [the Horton's Helpers], but I don't really know them, you know, like you, you, like you are with your sister or something, you know, your sister . . . you get to stay in the same room with them cause—I'm shy at first. But, you know, they treated you equal like your brothers and sisters would.

David raised over \$10,000 for the students to go on the trip by himself. He seemed very proud of himself. When asked why he thought the community was that supportive of the Horton's Helpers' venture to Michigan, he replied, "Well, probably because of what we were doing in class and how we made it to the competition because it took a lot of work." Why did the community support the Horton's Helpers in such a big way? David's comment points to the possible explanation that the win validated the students' work to the community.

Just as important, preparation for this competition and participation in an interview during the competition provided much-needed reflection. The scrapbook, the *Community Problem Solving Final Report*, the project board, and the videotape were all produced for the competition. The only other evidence of formal reflection were the student writings concerning the cemetery experience and the float decorating.

Discussion of the Effects of the Project on the Community

In addition to impacting the students, this project impacted the community, as well. Directly, it led to the beautification of the downtown area. It served to educate the community about its historic resources through the brochure, the walking tours, the CD-ROM, and the presentations to civic organizations. The Main Street Monster Mash helped to keep young trick-or-treaters safe on Halloween in 1998. More people became involved in the downtown area because of the project. It also benefited the school, helping it to reach its goals for gifted students.

This service learning project also impacted the community indirectly. Viewing youth as a positive element in the community was one effect of the project. Another involved student attitudes. As one student related, by knowing more about your community, you learn to like your community better, which gives you a reason to stay

involved in the future. And what better way to promote political efficacy in our youth than getting them involved in their community at an early age? It should be much more meaningful for students to experience civic responsibility than to read about it in a textbook. As Ms. Fitzpatrick, member of the DDA, expressed, if we want youth to become a significant part of a community and, hopefully, to improve that community, then it is incumbent upon us to involve them in it as early as possible.

Implications

This study has certainly not answered all the questions educators might have about the value of service learning for gifted youth. Nevertheless, its findings do contain implications that merit consideration for the education of the gifted, service learning, future research, and the community.

From allowing the students to determine their own course of study, to enabling them to experience and experiment with how things work and are done, this high level of service learning was very meaningful to these young, gifted adolescents. This interdisciplinary approach offered strong affective and process components and helped to sensitize these students to community problems and needs. The benefits were both short and long term. Short-term benefits for the students included the attainment of knowledge, connecting them to both the community and students from all over the world, travel to another part of the country, close relationships among each other, and a meaningful, fun experience. Long-term benefits are, of course, only speculative at this time. The students themselves expressed that they would become more involved with their community as a result of this experience. Hopefully, they will mature into effective citizens committed to both their community and to learning.

Connection to the Service Learning Movement

Although this study only addressed the effects of Community Action service learning, it does have implications for the service learning movement. Rather than looking at service learning as a *one-size-fits-all* curriculum, we should be examining different levels of service learning. Rather than eliminating activities included in Community Service and Community Exploration (see Figure 1) from the service learning arena as some service learning advocates have suggested (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999), we should be looking at service learning

developmentally and including all activities that incorporate the community into student learning. Typing the service learning activities according to the degrees of service to the community and learning by the students should be beneficial to the service learning movement.

Although previous studies have found differences between genders concerning effects of service learning, no such differences were found in this study. The findings of this study, however, are consistent with other studies in regard to the duration of the service learning activity and intellectual, personal, and social development. It has been found that the length or duration of service learning activities has an impact on student outcomes, with the longer duration projects (those lasting over 18 weeks) having greater impacts. For instance, no significant differences have been found between projects lasting 5 months and those lasting as long as 2 years, as both are considered long-duration projects. The service learning project on which this study focused lasted 1½ years; thus, it is considered to be long in duration, which helps to explain its impact on student outcomes. Further studies are needed, however, to examine the relationship between duration of the project and impact on the community.

Research is also needed to determine outcomes for a diversified culture of students, including, but not limited to, African American students and students with learning difficulties. In addition, research is needed to examine the different levels of service learning (see Figure 1) before professing any general claims concerning the outcomes for students engaged in service learning activities.

Service Learning as a Differentiated Curriculum for the Gifted

The findings of this study relate to other successful curricular approaches for the gifted that illustrate the importance of centering on students, accentuating their strengths, and valuing their interests (Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1994). This Community Action service learning project is similar to Renzulli's (1977) Type III Enrichment activities in the collection of raw data, application of problem-solving techniques, use of research strategies by first-hand investigators, and presentation of the findings to real audiences. As well as connecting to all of the elements of Type III enrichment activities, these findings point to a higher level, perhaps a Type IV experience. This higher level takes students beyond the level of just presenting the findings to a real audience (Terry, 2000). The students involved in this project went far beyond the presentation stage; they also implemented their plans and had a direct

impact not only on a real audience, but on their community, as well.

Instructional methodology is of utmost importance in service learning activities. Only through a conscious effort to lead students toward self-learning and independence; to give them opportunities to work cooperatively; to teach them the skills of creative problem solving; to provide ample, formal reflective activities; and to provide opportunities for celebration can gifted students reach the highest levels of learning and service during a service learning experience.

This study illustrates that service learning can be effective as a curriculum for young, gifted adolescents by involving them in activities centered around individual interests and talents and by connecting them to real-world situations that lead to authentic learning. Gifted students need more from their schooling than a simple regurgitation of facts from a teacher or a textbook. Problems occur when students have to start thinking in ways in which they have not been conditioned in schools, when they need to turn out their own ideas, rather than parroting those of others (Sternberg, 1996). The service learning project examined in this study provided these gifted students with opportunities to think, create, analyze, and implement their own ideas, thereby preparing them for life. By recognizing and developing the particular talent strengths of gifted students, as occurs in Community Action service learning projects, perhaps we can do a better job of meeting their needs.

Service Learning, the Gifted, and the Community

During the 21st century, we may be faced with more problems than our communities can handle, from social concerns, to environmental disasters. The best solutions to problems in our communities may be determined and enacted by our gifted youth through service learning. "Service learning," according to Senator John Glenn, "can help to lay the foundation for good scholarship—and good citizenship—for every young person in our country" (National Commission on Service Learning, 2002b, ¶ 3). By providing our gifted students opportunities for service learning, could we be not only helping to lay the foundation for good scholarship and good citizenship, but also helping to create a better tomorrow for our communities, our nation, and our world?

We need to help our students develop a sense of community—to get an early glimpse of what the real world is like by helping them to develop a personal interest in their community. According to Passow (1989), we often enhance our gifted students' knowledge without helping

them to think about the morality of that knowledge. Since gifted children have the potential for greater and more profound social, moral, and ethical concerns (Passow), they should be given opportunities in their educational experience to develop socially, morally, and ethically. Higher levels of service learning can provide such opportunities. Not only do the students learn during their participation in service learning, but they also experience serving their communities, making a real difference in the world. By sensitizing gifted and talented youth to problems in their communities, might they devote themselves to developing their specialized gifts and talents to solving the serious problems facing our world?

Instead of the relationship of separateness that exists now between youth and community, we need to develop a symbiotic relationship of mutualism in which youth and the community rely on one another. Perhaps the old African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," will coexist with a new proverb, "It takes a child to raise *up* a village."

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