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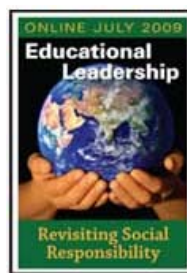


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Revisiting Social Responsibility

### Service Learning: The Power to Inspire *Maria Sudeck and Theodore Hartman*

Here's what happens when students learn they can make a difference.



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In this time of change in the United States' cultural and political landscape, teachers and curriculum leaders have good reasons to incorporate service learning into instruction. Service learning gives students the opportunity to master the core curriculum while becoming engaged in the local, national, and global challenges of our times.

Service comes in many different forms, including community service (volunteering to clean up a park, promoting literacy for people in the neighborhood, or working in a food bank) and social activism (writing letters to the editor, organizing rallies, or holding debate forums) (Coles, 1993). But *service learning* is more than just service because it integrates these activities into curriculum content. O'Byrne (2006) delineates three essential components of service learning:

1. Organized service that engages students in active participation.
2. Integrated academic curriculum and service.
3. Embedded opportunities for civic responsibility and community leadership.

### The Power to Inspire Civic Involvement

John Dewey (1915) asserted that children need "the confidence to act and think for themselves" for our society to have hope "of establishing the truth of democratic ideals" (p. 218). A well-designed service learning unit enables students to become active participants in their learning process and gives them choices about how they reach their service objectives. Through this approach, students learn to think independently and become more aware of how their academic development leads to personal and social progress.

Service learning can be particularly powerful in inspiring students from historically marginalized socioeconomic groups. Paulo Freire (1970) writes that such students "feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond" when they are faced with problems relating to themselves in the world (p. 81). As students learn how to respond to these challenges, they "come to regard themselves as committed" to accomplishing their objective (Freire, 1970, p. 81). Service learning that is connected to students' lives empowers them to help address the very issues that might impede or foster their personal success.

Here, we describe two ways that service learning has tremendous power to transform students, classes, and school communities. The first is an elementary unit developed by a student teacher supervised by Maria, in which 4th graders raised funds to support a foundation that assists sick adolescents. The second is a unit on child welfare that Ted developed and differentiated for high school students in an honors class and an intervention class.

### Helping Hospitalized Adolescents

In a 4th grade classroom in southern New Jersey, students learned about the challenges facing children

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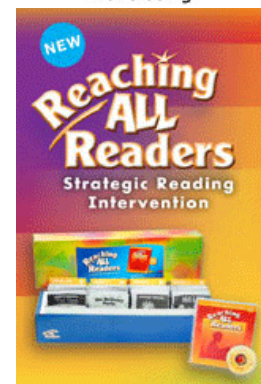
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hospitalized by serious illnesses and about a foundation dedicated to helping adolescents facing this situation. The school population is a combination of students from suburban middle class and rural working class homes. To begin the unit, the student teacher led a large-group discussion about different organizations, focusing on foundations. She asked general questions to gauge students' awareness of foundations and similar organizations. From there, she had the class perform preliminary online research on different foundations using the classroom computers.

The next day, the students returned to the computers to learn about the [Alicia Rose "Victorious" Foundation](#), an organization founded in the memory of a teen who died of cancer, whose mission is to enhance the lives of adolescents who are hospitalized with life-threatening illnesses. After learning about the foundation's mission, the students read stories that exemplified the theme of compassion. The teacher also designed a health-related lesson about other illnesses that may hospitalize children, state health department standards regarding illness and special conditions, and hospitalized adolescents.

Through additional research, the students then learned about Bandana Days, events that the Alicia Rose "Victorious" Foundation sponsors in schools across the United States to raise awareness and funds to help young people with life-threatening illnesses. Applying math lessons to the fund-raising idea, the teacher helped students understand how they could raise funds for this cause.

The students then went out into the community, fully committed to their cause, and raised hundreds of dollars by selling bandanas. Students developed their communication skills as they informed peers and elders about the foundation and their commitment to Bandana Day; they applied their visual art skills by making informative posters to publicize their cause. Back in the classroom, the students wrote letters to hospitalized children and assembled Teen Kits, which the foundation distributes. These kits include items that hospitalized teens have told the foundation they would especially like, such as games, a journal, pens, socks, tissues, gum, and a prepaid phone card.

By the time Bandana Day arrived, nearly every student in the school had purchased a bandana (and the parents' organization bought extra bandanas to ensure that every student had one). Parents, teachers, students, and staff attended an assembly; the scene was so colorful that one student later wrote, "It looked like a rainbow exploded and all the colors landed on everyone's head." At the assembly, the students presented the foundation with the funds they had raised and the Teen Kits they had created.

To conclude the unit, the students wrote journal entries reflecting on their experiences. Their reflections showed that the students recognized that their work had contributed to the greater good. They had become emotionally immersed in helping the foundation and committed to the learning process needed to reach their service objectives.

## Advocating for Help for Child Soldiers

In the predominately Latino community of Pico Rivera in Los Angeles, students at El Rancho High School learned about children around the world who are suffering horrific experiences as soldiers in deadly warfare. Ted designed a multifaceted service learning unit aimed at bringing students to a deep understanding of complex global issues and giving them an opportunity to act in unison for a cause. He differentiated the unit for two widely different groups of students: a sophomore honors class and a sophomore intervention class.

The honors class began by reading *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, using the novel's themes as a basis for literary and critical analysis to help them understand the effects of industrialization on the welfare of children. After their study of the novel, students moved on to researching current issues of child welfare.

Individual students could choose from among many issues for their research. Some chose education and health topics, but most chose child soldiers or sweat shops. Ted helped students discuss the interconnectedness of their topics, and students gained a more complex understanding of the world. For their research papers, the class conducted academic research on the Internet, synthesizing information from various sources, organizing an argument and support, developing a thesis-driven research paper, and producing a finished manuscript.

The intervention class also wrote research papers, but Ted introduced the topic of child soldiers to them more directly by showing a movie involving child soldiers in Africa and playing songs describing children in warfare. After their interest in the topic was engaged, the students drew names of countries from a list. Working in conjunction with the librarian, Ted selected research articles and other online sources for each of the countries that were specifically aimed to help emerging readers gain confidence in their ability to access information. As in the honors class, Ted led the class through the steps of the research and writing process.

Both classes then came together as they worked on a service project called the [Red Hand Campaign](#) to help child soldiers. Supported by Amnesty International, the Red Hand Campaign has the goal of persuading one million people, especially children, to send red handprints to the United Nations to encourage the UN to enforce its ban on the use of children as soldiers. Students in both classes decided on one objective: bringing at least five other students to the Red Hand Days. During lunch period every day for a week, students brought peers to the classroom and created hundreds of artistic Red Hand messages. In addition, students from both classes created a display and interactive lesson for the school's annual project fair publicizing their research and their service project. Using their presentation

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and persuasion skills, students created several hundred more red handprints in one night. All totaled, two classes of students generated more than 500 messages to send to the Red Hand Campaign.

## Success Stories

Success in service learning comes on many levels. When students are engaged in their learning process and committed to their results, they learn academic content in meaningful and lasting ways. Historically marginalized students come to class excited to learn and even spend extracurricular time completing their service projects.

Service learning fosters not only academic successes, but also students' awareness of themselves as socially responsible people. One elementary student exclaimed in his final journal, "Helping someone makes me feel fantastic!" More deeply, he continued, "I may not get anything in return, but I'm helping someone."

At the high school level, student comments revealed that they were emotionally involved in their service learning. One student in the intervention class who rarely committed himself to schoolwork expressed his new feeling of involvement, saying "I hope they get enough red handprints to help all the children in their time of need." Another student in the class, who usually had little confidence in his academic abilities, said that the service project made him "feel smart sending a message to the United Nations."

A sophomore honors student seemed to speak for most of the students involved: "It was a really good feeling telling friends about the child soldier problem and seeing them also help the cause." Another student expressed the core of service learning: "The Red Hand Campaign may have been the start, but it is not the end," he wrote in his journal. "It motivated me to fight against the spirit of selfishness and greed."

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