

Character Education and Service-Learning

Source: RMC Research Corporation, September 2006

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How Does Current Research in Character Education Support Service-Learning?

- Research conducted by RMC Research Corporation (2005) found that students who participated in the Partnerships in Character Education project (character education project integrating service-learning components) in Philadelphia reported gains on the civic engagement measure from fall 2004 to spring 2005. Participating students also reported greater increases in prosocial behaviors, such as altruism, caring, respect, and ability to choose between right and wrong, than their peers in the comparison group.
- The “What Works in Character Education” project (2005), led by Berkowitz and Bier of the University of Missouri-St. Louis and commissioned by Character Education Partnership, reviewed 33 successful character education programs. The researchers gathered the existing findings to look for patterns and draw conclusions about best practice. Community service/service-learning was recognized as one of the pedagogical strategies utilized in the best practice sites.
- Scott and Jackson (2005) found that using service-learning concepts as part of comprehensive guidance endorsed the middle school philosophy in multiple ways and helped middle school students meet comprehensive guidance program goals related to academic/learning development, life/career development, personal/social development, and multicultural/global citizenship. Five major themes pertinent to middle school student development included personal awareness, social skills, learning skills, career interests, and character education. Middle school students, who received comprehensive guidance curriculum instruction in their service-learning class and then taught a similar curriculum to elementary school students, reported learning character education skills and how to be better citizens in addition to being academically successful.
- “Smart & Good High Schools” authored by Lickona and Davidson (2005) was a national study of American high schools including site visits to 24 diverse schools, a comprehensive research review, and the input of a National Experts Panel and a National Student Leaders Panel. The report advocated a shift from focusing on moral character to both moral and performance character. The report identified “contributing community member and democratic citizen” as one of the eight strengths of character and described service-learning as an effective strategy to “engage students in service” to achieve this goal. The report also included a summary of research findings on the impacts of service-learning indicating that it helps increase students’ sense of civic and social responsibility and citizenship skills, improves school climate, increases respect between teachers and students, decreases tardiness and discipline referrals, increases academic achievement, and improves interpersonal development as well as the ability to relate to diverse groups.
- The report authored by Tonn (2005) and produced by the Washington, DC-based American Youth Policy Forum and the Alexandria, Virginia-based Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development reported that civic education in the United States is being neglected because of a renewed emphasis on reading and math spurred by the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act and included a 7-point agenda for

improving civic education, and ultimately civic engagement, across the country.

- An action research conducted by Blozis, Scalise, Waterman, and Wells (2002) on middle and high school students in several growing, middle class communities located in northern Illinois found that character development, service-learning, and multicultural competency can be effective intervention strategies to increase student involvement in community and school activities, to increase understanding of their role and responsibilities as a citizen, and to promote a growing sensitivity to diverse cultures.
- Muscott in his 2001 article described an after-school service-learning and character education program, Service-Learning Opportunities (SO) Prepared for Citizenship, designed to advance the prosocial behavior of students exhibiting either temporary or longstanding emotional and behavioral problems. The article addressed the use of service-learning and character education as major strategies with the students with “egos that cannot perform” to help them develop self control.

Based on these findings, and other research on character education programs, it is clear that character education supports service-learning and that service-learning provides an environment in which the goals and values of character education can be enhanced.

Developing and Integrating Character Education and Service-Learning at Your School

- Canvas the community to understand their needs and willingness to work with students.
- Define character education clearly and comprehensively so that all participants share a common vision and mission.
- Identify core values by involving students, family members, school staff, and community members in the process.
- Train school personnel in character education and service-learning so that the activities are of high quality and positive outcomes are more likely to accrue.
- Infuse character education and service-learning into every aspect of the school culture and curriculum so that both are viewed as essential rather than as add-ons.
- Design student materials and orientation processes for service-learning so that students can understand and play important roles in planning and implementing activities.
- Reinforce the connection between service-learning core values and the curriculum through written and oral reflection opportunities for all participants.
- Conduct an evaluation to assess and understand the program’s effectiveness and use the information to improve.
- Share your experiences and best practices with other schools so that more schools become involved in character education and program quality is improved.

For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation see the complete online fact sheet at

http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/k-12_facts/char_ed/expanded.php

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