

Finding Service in Education

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In the late 1960s, while attending La Sierra University in Riverside, California, I explained to a group of 3rd and 4th graders that I would be involved in a service project in a remote part of Africa. There was a critical need for a medical clinic to be built in the tiny, inaccessible village of Masenjere, Malawi. When the students heard that I would be ferrying a plane to Africa and would be visiting the village, their eagerness to be involved evolved into a whirlwind of activities. They organized bake sales, car washes, paper collection, and many other activities to raise money for the village.

These students were drawn into an ever-deeper relationship with the

ways to integrate service into my classes in order to respond to the sense of disconnection many students experience in their daily lives. Many young people feel a growing loss of connection with family, teachers, learning, the church, and their own hearts. They find school to be increasingly irrelevant and see their teachers as distant from them and from the context of their lives. They describe others and themselves more as objects than as sacred beings.

Some have

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project when they later received letters, tape recordings, and pictures pertaining to my experiences in Masenjere. They were able to see and hear how their efforts had made a difference in the lives of children and adults. When I returned to California, these young people gathered to hear and see the results of the venture. They also received a carved piece of ironwood given to me by the chief and engraved with the words "THANK YOU FROM MASENJERE, MALAWI."

Integrating Service Into the Classroom

After I became a teacher, I was inspired to find

Above and pages 32 and 33: The author's students help with the Special Olympics.

learned to respond to their disconnected lives by giving in to the immediate gratification of every impulse. Such students focus much of their time and energy on acquisitions: getting grades, earning a degree, seeking a good job, and buying a new car (while contemplating more degrees, better positions, etc.). Consequently, the challenge for educators is to reveal to students the joy and connective value of service and to remind them of our moral and spiritual responsibility to care for one another.

When examining the purpose and nature of service, I saw that it would provide an antidote to this discon-

nected, “me first,” self-indulgent view of life. Ellen White reminds us of the powerful way in which service builds a sense of spiritual connectedness:

Our Lord teaches that the true object of life is ministry. Christ Himself was a worker, and to all His followers He gives the law of service—service to God and to their fellow men. Here Christ has presented to the world a higher conception of life than they had ever known. By living to minister for others, man is brought into connection with Christ. The law of service becomes the

project on the students, their peers, those being served, and me has been startling and inspiring.

Dealing With Student Fears

Students were to document their service and then write an appraisal of the experience. I could see that many of them felt uncomfortable with the idea of trying something they had never done before, so I encouraged them to share their fears in class.

their stories in class. They usually began by telling how they selected and approached their project. They meekly expressed their fears and doubts about being able to make a difference in someone’s life and how they overcame that fear. For many, it was their first experience, as one student put it, with “helping someone less fortunate than myself.”

Some students eagerly shared their experiences. One student described her service project at a homeless shelter as a memorable, life-changing experience and as the “most rewarding project of this class.” After hearing these stories,

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*connecting link
which binds us to God and to our
fellow men.¹*

A Classroom Experience

Recently, I decided to introduce my Educational Foundations class to the concept of service. I wanted it to be more than a theoretical or abstract discussion. Consequently, I built into the syllabus of a teacher education class the opportunity for them to participate in a service project. This was presented as an option, not a requirement to be graded. Those who opted for the project were asked to perform five hours of service for a person or a group with a special need. A list of possible projects began to emerge as students sought out places to serve and brought their ideas to class. The impact of this optional

Students soon began asking questions about the specific service projects they had in mind. For example, could they visit retirement homes and talk to people, tutor students after school, or pick up trash along the highway? These questions helped them to sort through various concepts of service and to form a clearer idea of activities they might choose. The majority of the projects selected dealt with service to individuals—such as cleaning someone’s house, listening to a senior citizen’s storytelling, helping a student who was having difficulty with course work, or visiting a child in the hospital.

A couple of weeks after announcing their projects, students began to share

some students who were initially uncertain or fearful about participating in a service project also decided to participate. Once students overcame some of their negative perceptions of service, they participated enthusiastically and had heartwarming experiences.

Students Report on Their Experiences

The following excerpts are from some of the stories they wrote describing their experiences.

Kelley described what unfolded when she and Lori apprehensively chose

to work at a local soup kitchen: "Once I started working with these people, the thought of time escaped my mind. I was extremely happy to be feeding all these people. I was asked to ride on the van and deliver food to the people who could not make it to the soup kitchen. We packed 30 bags of food. I was so happy that I would run to the doors and smile really big, and as they opened the door, I would speak kindly to them. One lady said, 'Your smile is enough, I don't even need that bag of food, you made my day.'

"I will never forget how grateful most of the people were. When we dropped the last meals, two older ladies, who were sisters, hugged my neck and told me they loved me. I couldn't believe how selfish I was to even think this wonderful day was going to be a waste of my time. I know now this will not be the last time I do this kind of work. I called my parents as soon as I got home and thanked them for the wonderful things they had provided. This was a life-changing experience."

Kelley and Lori found this experience meaningful to their lives in many ways. It was through service that they met others who helped people in need. They were delighted to be helping to make a direct impact on people's lives. Prior to this experience, Lori said, "[we] were unable to understand that there are people who are less fortunate and sometimes they need a helping hand. It is so important for people to help one another and understand the dire straits that affect some families' lives."

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Another story, shared by Leslie, described a most remarkable and painful experience: "I went to the shelter not knowing what to expect. That is where I met Derek, a 22-year-old white male. He has AIDS and is deteriorating rapidly. Derek really touched my heart. After telling his parents of his condition, he was kicked out of the house. He wasn't making enough to rent a place to stay so he started living in his car. That's around the time that he started to feel the effects of AIDS. He got sores all over his body and caught pneumonia. He didn't go to the doctor. He missed several days of work and was eventually fired. He has no job, and his car was repossessed. Since then, he has been wandering from shelter to shelter. Now he is just slowly deteriorating, and it is so sad to think that there is nothing that I can do for him. I sat for hours and talked to him. I just wanted to take him home with me and take care of him. I could see the pain in his eyes. When I left from there, I cried all the way home."

Service experiences like this stimulate compassion in ways that nothing else can. Leslie's contact with Derek taught her more about her need to serve than any lecture, research paper, or sermon ever could. This experience led her and everyone in class to understand the possibility of developing a deep level of connection through service.

Students Analyze Their Experiences

My students' analyses of their experiences were often subtle and gripping. They told of their struggles with values, their need to be involved in service, and their ability to connect with someone. They told of the "rewards" they received—the joy and peace they found throughout the experience.

After collecting and distributing food and clothing to a needy family, Gloria said: "Being able to help someone who was less fortunate than me was the best feeling I could ever experience. Life goes on even if people do not have food to eat or clothes to fit. Some

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of us need to re-examine our lives and our goals. We need to put helping and giving to others on the top of our priority list. We must all help one another and love one another."

Michelle had never before considered giving up some of her time to visit people in a nursing home. She had no idea what to expect.

"My experience taught me about love and caring. If the family members will not take the time to see his/her parents or relatives in the nursing home, people like me can make a difference by just stopping in their rooms and saying, 'Hello, how are you doing today?'"

"Most importantly, I learned that these elderly people were not mere figments of my imagination, but they are people who could one day represent someone in my own family. This kind of situation just made my heart melt. I believe I am a more rounded person, and I now have the ability to express my feelings more freely."

Kevin's only regret about his experience at the Carrollton Soup Kitchen "is that I have not been involved before, and I can't do more for some of the people I met." Jamie no longer takes for granted her ability to do simple tasks after having worked with a Down's Syndrome child. She received much self-satisfaction from the experience, and plans to go back. After Amy visited elderly people at the Meadowbrook

Manor, she wrote:

"This service project touched my heart. I'll conclude with a quote: 'Some people come into our lives and quickly go. . . . Some people stay for a while and leave tiny footprints on our hearts . . . and we are never, ever the same.' Although I've completed my five hours, I will continue with my 'mission.'"

Service is not only a missing element in the lives of many students, it also offers a stark contrast to the codes of social order and conduct that typically govern modern life. These future teachers saw a world in which children, adults, and the elderly feel disconnected from each other, the world, and their very hearts; they saw the great need for connection and healing. They are now better able to understand children who have to face the challenges of poverty, dysfunctional homes, and abandonment, as well as the pressures from an increasingly competitive and narcissistic educational and cultural climate.

More importantly, the service option raised questions about the role of the teacher as a servant and colleague who can relate from the heart. Rather than merely learning a theoretical rationale for performing a service project, these students' understanding of service developed directly from the positive impact the experiences have had on their lives. They understand the importance of serving others, and have expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to do a service project.

Implications

The implications of teaching students about service reaches far beyond helping needy people or fulfilling some altruistic notion; it helps them form needed connections and reconnections. It informs students about their need for reconciliation with strangers, each other, and their own hearts. Service teaches about connection, caring, compassion, and moral responsibility. At a deeper level, many students find themselves deeply connected to the people they helped. As soon as my student, Shea, walked into the foster home, she was drawn to Amy. One of three foster children in the home, Amy had been constantly overlooked by sponsors be-

cause, as she put it, "I am not as skinny or cute as the others." Soon Amy called Shea aside and asked with a look of foreboding whether she was going to sponsor her for weekends out. During our next class, Shea handed me an application from the foster home to look over and with tears in her eyes expressed her joy that she and Amy had found each other.

Loving service is the most powerful gift on earth to draw people together and link them on a deep spiritual level. Through such service, students are drawn into relationships and come to know someone in a way that is not possible through any other means. This spiritual connection forms the basis of and preparation for "kingdom living."

Students saw these experiences as transformational, spiritual, insightful, rewarding, and necessary. Doubtless such experiences will awaken compassion and empathy in the heart of each student, and some will choose a life of service. I have seen in my students a willingness and often an eagerness to become involved in service programs.

There is a critical need to teach a service orientation at every level of Adventist education, a training that explores our moral and spiritual responsibility to care for each other without expecting to be rewarded. Again, Ellen White reminds us of the great importance of focusing on service in education:

*In our life here, earthly, sin-restricted though it is, the greatest joy and the highest education are in service. And in the future state, untrammelled by the limitations of sinful humanity, it is in service that our greatest joy and our highest education will be found.*²

Indeed, we have been redeemed for service! ☞

Thomas A. Peterson, Ed.D., is Assistant Professor of Education at the State University of West Georgia in Carrollton, Georgia. A graduate of Loma Linda University and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Dr. Peterson has taught in Adventist elementary and secondary schools and has served as a junior academy principal. In 1998, he was voted "College of Education Faculty Member of

the Year" by students enrolled in the State University of West Georgia education program.

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