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B. Bartlett
Scott L. Hunsaker
Utah State University

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BY BRIANNE BARTLETT & SCOTT L. HUNSAKER, UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

Service learning benefits all students, but has particular benefits for gifted learners because it addresses their specialized needs. Scholars indicate that service learning is important for gifted learners because it provides an authentic learning experience; motivates them to participate in class activities; connects school and real-world experience; helps them construct meaning through research, authentic problem solving, and decision-making; supports them in pursuing their own interests; and results in increased self-esteem, leadership, and sense of mission (Lewis, 1996; Pleasants, Stephens, Selph, & Pfeiffer, 2004).

The National Association for Gifted Children (1998) curriculum and instruction program standards state, “Differentiated educational program curricula for students pre-K-12 should be modified to provide learning experiences matched to students’ interests, readiness, and learning styles” (Standard 5.1E). Service learning helps create this match. Gifted students already have an interest in and concern for the major issues and problems of today’s world, and through service learning they can address their concerns and make authentic contributions to solving the problems. Gifted students need to feel they are participating in activities that have meaning; activities that go beyond textbooks and teachers to encourage genuine learning. Service learning challenges gifted students to stretch themselves beyond their comfort levels, take risks, and gain self-confidence (Pleasants et al., 2004).

The Advanced Readers at Risk Project

Service learning is a key component in Utah’s Advanced Readers at Risk (ARAR) project funded by a federal Jacob K. Javits grant. Often students who read above grade level do not receive the teacher’s focus during reading instruction, so their needs are typically ignored, placing them at risk for issues like underachievement, boredom, and misbehavior. The failure to address the express needs of gifted readers has been shown to result in declines in positive attitude toward reading, especially as grade level increases (Swiatek & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2000). ARAR grew directly out of this concern. Teachers in the project received training on identifying advanced readers, organizing classrooms for instruction, selecting suitable reading content, applying appropriate instructional strategies, and being an ambassador for the project.

World Class Reader Model

The strategies implemented in ARAR are based on the World Class Reader Model, which includes four basic components: (1) Learning to Read; (2) Reading to Learn; (3) Reading to Serve; and (4) Reading for Leisure. Through Learning to Read, gifted readers learn skills needed to read challenging material. Reading to Learn involves applying the learned skills to new and challenging material, including advanced content and literature. Reading to Serve challenges gifted readers to utilize their literacy skills to identify and address personal, local, national, or global problems. In Reading for Leisure, readers develop greater enjoyment, interest, and choice in their personal reading. Reading to Serve, the focus of this article, includes service learning as an integral component. Gifted readers focus on school, community, state, national, and global problems or issues to address through service and use their knowledge and literacy-based skills to brainstorm and implement possible solutions. A specific process for Reading to Serve activities is implemented...
by ARAR teachers, and is discussed below.

Reading to Serve

In ARAR classrooms, Reading to Serve projects follow five basic steps. Preparation consists of brainstorming and choosing possible local or global problems, issues, or needs to address. Action requires gifted readers to identify and implement their plan of service. Reflection involves gifted students reflecting on the success, problems, and personal experiences related to the project. Evaluation consists of gifted readers and their teachers assessing the results of the service. Celebration is the final step, where the teacher and gifted readers simply celebrate the act of their service.

Analysis of ARAR service learning projects shows that gifted readers conducted two types of literacy-based service learning projects: social service and educational. Social service projects extend beyond the school community and do not have a direct educational component. Educational projects were the most popular types used by ARAR teachers and gifted students. They seek to teach others within the school environment about an issue that the students research.

An Educational Project

To illustrate each of the steps, follow us into a 6th-grade ARAR classroom. Notice the students sitting at their desks as the teacher encourages the first brainstorming efforts to identify a problem of interest, the Preparation Stage. "What does it mean to 'Read to Serve' within our school community?" You see one student raise his hand and mention the fact that theirs is a year-round school where students are not always together as a full group. Another student raises his hand and states that there is not enough time to do a large project. "And we don't have any money to use," another student states from the back of the class. Observe that the teacher looks thoughtful for a moment and then articulates the criteria for decision-making offered by the students, "Each of you has brought up great points. This means that we are going to have to choose a project that works for our schedule, doesn't cost a lot of money, and will work for our school. Let's brainstorm possible service ideas keeping all of this in mind."

Over the next two days you watch as the students consider potential service projects, the beginning of the Action stage. You watch as they talk about their ideas in groups, write their ideas on the board, and break into groups to evaluate their ideas. After a while the teacher calls the students together to make a master brainstorm list, and you see an onslaught of ideas filling almost one entire side of the board.

The teacher contemplates the list and asks, "Which of these ideas works with our schedule, the school, and won't cost us a lot of money?" Ideas are thrown around before one student finally remarks, "Well, it's April, so why don't we do something about the Earth. We could write and perform a play that illustrates the purpose and meaning behind Earth Day. What about 'Every Day is Earth Day'?" The rest of the students are excited about this and latch onto the idea immediately. They decide they need informational posters to advertise the play. Action is in full swing.

The next thing you know, the students are reading and researching all the ecological and environmental literature they can find. You discover them reading non-fiction books on the environment; you encounter them in groups conducting research in the library and computer lab; and you observe them huddled over large poster boards and three-dimensional art work pouring their newfound information about water, air, fossil fuels, and garbage onto their projects. Then the students ceremoniously hang their posters in the front hallway for the entire school to view. Now watch as groups are formed to produce readers' theatre performances to be presented in third-grade classrooms. The teacher gives students instruction on how to translate their information about the
environment into dramatic scenarios and teaches the conventions for scriptwriting. The students busily begin their writing and editing. You enjoy the commitment they show as they stage and rehearse their parts.

At the conclusion of the project, the teacher and students sit together to converse about the project. This is the Reflection stage. You look around the room and realize how proud the students are of their hard work. One student replies, “I was just happy to do something with all the work we did. The poster and readers’ theatres were really cool.” Several other students agree and say that they were “happy to complete work not just for a grade, but for something that was real.” The teacher gives her own input reflecting on the project: “I really wish that we would have had more time though, because I would have liked for us to have been able to create student journals about our experiences with the project. And I would have loved for you to do more teaching projects with younger grades.” This comment segways into an Evaluation of the project. Students now list the positive and negative aspects of their experience, offering suggestions for changes and improvement. Here, the teacher looks around at the students and says, “You all have worked so hard on this project, and I know that many of the other teachers and students have congratulated you on it, but unfortunately we don’t have enough time for a true Celebration. However, I hope that you feel as I do that the change in the routine is a celebration in itself.” As you leave the classroom, you feel the need for more of a celebration, but are in awe over the work the students accomplished.

A Service Project

Now join a 5th-grade classroom for an example of an ARAR social service project. This time, however, imagine the students standing in front of 20 to 30 men and women in a senior citizen center. As you look closer, you realize the students are performing a play about famous people. You hear the names Teddy Roosevelt, Babe Ruth, and Walt Disney. You listen intently to the play as it continues with references to Eleanor Roosevelt, Henry Ford, and Louis Armstrong. You have no doubt that the seniors are enjoying the play as you note the smiles on their faces. As you listen, you realize that the students have spent an extraordinary amount of time researching each character. You enjoy hearing positive student comments about this project and observe the delight visible in the audience.

Let us look at a few other projects under way in the 5th-grade classroom. The class has been discussing both breast cancer and protected nature spaces. You overhear a teacher announcing that her sister was recently diagnosed with breast cancer. The students begin chatting about breast cancer survivors in their school. Make your way over to a group of students gathered in the corner where they work on posters and school announcements discussing breast cancer. Notice a flyer for The Race for the Cure on May 15th, and hear two students discussing how excited they are for the race.
Gifted students need to feel they are participating in activities that have meaning; activities that go beyond textbooks.

during their service project. Over the next few days, students are no longer writing just about breast cancer or protected nature spaces, but are beginning to develop new ideas about other possible projects.

During a class discussion, a student announces that his mother has had a baby with a cleft lip and palate. The students are curious, and the teacher has them conduct research using the Internet. After the students learn about cleft palate and lip, a few students begin working on an idea, and soon they’ve announced that they would now like to do a project raising $250 to pay for the baby’s surgery. This becomes the third project the students have started.

Over the new few weeks, the students continue to research cleft lips and palates, and at one point students begin creating posters to educate the school on everything they have learned. They even talk to other classrooms about their fundraising goals. Later, one little girl shouts out the idea for a car wash to raise the money, and the entire class explodes with excitement as the teacher states, “That’s a great idea! We’ll do the fundraiser for the whole school.”

Picture a school carwash, and through the bubbles and water-soaked kids, you’ll hear the laughter and sounds of success from the students as they go from car to car. At the end of the day the teacher stands before the class and announces proudly, “The car wash was a hit! We made our goal. As a celebration we are going to announce the final donation amount raised at the awards assembly and honor each of you with certificates of participation and a DVD slideshow of the event!” This event motivates the group seeking to protect various nature spaces. Excited, they begin work on the next stage of their project, drafting a proposal for a new protected space.

Conclusion

Reading to Serve provides authentic experience in identifying problems, creating solutions, planning, and taking action. Reading to Serve is powerful because it gives students an opportunity to see that their reading skills, as well as the content of their reading, are relevant to their world. Reading to Serve provides motivation to advanced readers to hone their skills in a meaningful context.

Teachers in grades 3 through 8 might consider how to use reading instruction to generate differentiated curriculum in the form of independent projects. Reading to Serve provides a way to harness gifted students' motivation, creativity, and compassion; channeling it not only for their academic development, but also for the benefit of their school and local communities.

References


