Engaging with community

How schools are helping their students become informed, responsible and compassionate citizens

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In Tasmania, high school students sit with senior citizens and individually tutor them in computer skills. At a school in Victoria, Year 9 students studying hospitality serve a meal to community guests and provide dinner entertainment. In a small rural New South Wales primary school, the children are busy in their HOPE gardens, harvesting vegetables for charity groups who take food packages to families in need. Each of these scenarios represents a deliberate attempt to connect students with their community through service.

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As the 21st Century continues to bring changes to the structure of society, educators are continually challenged in their role of preparing students to take their place in society. In order to achieve this, some schools are exploring the possibilities and benefits of engaging their students with the local community, arguing that citizenship develops within the context of society. Before the industrial revolution, most children had ample opportunities to engage with their community, as their home was their school, and their community their playground. They learnt to live and work within the context of their local community. While the post industrial model of schooling, which groups children according to age, has its advantages, there are also drawbacks to segregating them from wider society for large portions of time. With a call to raise the standard of education, and renewed emphasis on testing, educators are once again calling attention to the real purpose of education.

> Is your job to teach children to pass exams? Or is it to teach children to think, and from there, grow as morally sound and decent people who are educated to know right from wrong and use their education accordingly? (Gilbert, 2011, p. 126)

Noddings, in her book, *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*, makes a salient point.

> Teachers not only have to create caring relations in which they are the carers, but that they also have the responsibility to help their students develop a capacity to care. (2005, p. 18)

She posits four components of learning to care: modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation. Noddings suggests building a culture of care that is complemented by 'hands-on' caring, where students experience themselves as the carers rather than caring from a distance (i.e. through fundraising and donations). She argues that this process of learning to care has positive outcomes for both the community and the students involved.

Goleman (2011, p. 44), sharing insights from a neuroscience perspective, identifies three motivating forces in an individual's life. These are:

- the need for a "socially beneficial power, where you take pleasure in influencing people for the better or common good";
- the need to affiliate, especially when working with others for a shared purpose; and
- the need for achievement, "reaching toward a meaningful goal".

Involvement of students in community projects goes a long way towards satisfying these identified needs.

Exploring the topic from a social perspective, commentator Hugh Mackay (2010) has composed a list of ten desires that drive individuals. Included in this list are the desires to connect, to be useful and to belong. When schools offer opportunities for students to work towards meaningful goals in a context beyond the school environment, they are providing authentic experiences that help them connect, build a sense of community belonging, and gain the satisfaction of making a useful contribution to society.

Added to these sound reasons for community involvement is the biblical injunction to care for others (James 1:27, Micah 6:8, Mark 12:31, James 2:14–17, 1 John 4:19–21) which, for Christian schools, gives a clear mandate for many forms of community service and engagement. Jesus gave the ultimate example of

community engagement through His acts of selfless love on earth, culminating in His death on the cross. Furthermore, 1 John 4:7 tells us that God is love, and when God dwells in us, the manifestation of His love is through acts of service to others.

Schools that are intentional in bringing community and school together are enjoying the rewards this liaison brings. Service learning is gaining strength in all sectors of education. Community projects bring benefits to both the recipients and the students and staff. School programs may benefit the community in a variety of ways. One benefit may be the sharing of skills or resources. Secondly, programs that involve social interaction are a bonus, especially for individuals who may lead somewhat isolated lives. Thirdly, students may be involved in projects that help meet the physical or emotional needs of individuals in the wider community.

Community projects also have several key advantages for students. The first benefit is in the area of building self-esteem. Goleman (2011) maintains that healthy self-esteem is built primarily through a sense of accomplishment. Involvement in community projects contributes to that sense of accomplishment; of achieving something lasting and worthwhile that extends beyond the boundaries of self-accomplishment.

A second benefit of school/community involvement is that it provides opportunities for students to put their values into action. Values that are experienced are internalised. The process of building citizenships skills in students ties in very closely with the values of responsibility, justice, care and compassion. As part of the process of becoming 'good' citizens, students need to experience community and participate in care activities, accepting this as part of their responsibility to others.

Thirdly, by connecting students to the wider community, schools are helping them to become informed as they learn about the needs of other sectors in the community; responsible as they discover the interconnectedness of society and compassionate as they take action to make a difference in someone's life.

What follows in this article is a snapshot of schools that are taking the biblical directive of service seriously and finding ways to make it a reality for their students. Some schools are involved directly in acts of service, others are providing a positive role model of community to students and some are using the skills and abilities of the students to make a much-appreciated contribution to a targeted sector of society. All are using the school curriculum to extend their students and provide opportunities for citizenship building.

HOPE Garden

The acronym HOPE stands for Helping Other People Eat. Shannon Quick, principal of the Manning Adventist School fosters a sense of community belonging in his school through a gardening project. Using a no dig organic sandwich gardening method, Quick and his students grow fresh vegetables year round in raised garden beds and then donate them to charity groups who use them for food parcels. Students are involved in each step of the project, from bed preparation, choosing vegetables, planting and garden maintenance to researching organisations that may be able to use the produce, harvesting, packaging and handing over the produce. It is really important, maintains Quick, that the students are involved in the actual handing over process, as well as planting and tending the vegetables as this helps develop a sense of community identity. In this program, the emphasis is on giving the best of their produce to others. Giving is not new, says Quick, but often we give from our overflow. HOPE Garden focuses on giving what we would desire for ourselves. It also offers hope in two ways; physical hope and hope for eternity through sharing and fellowship.

Computers for Seniors

When Cheryl Walsh responded to a request for people to help senior citizens with learning computer skills, she was unprepared for the success of the program. As a result of a community survey, Year seven and eight students from Northwest Christian School in Penguin, Tasmania interacted with seniors in their community, teaching them basic computer skills. A volunteer ICT technician supervised each session and provided technical backup. The tutoring program was a great hit with the over 65s, who responded positively to their youthful tutors and surprised themselves with their new skills. In

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HOPE Garden produce

[Photograph: Shannon Quick]

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turn, the students were able to meet a need in their community, resulting in a sense of accomplishment and increased self-confidence when dealing with the older generation. Friendships were formed as the generations shared and perceptions each had of the other were significantly altered.

Eating with Friends

At Lilydale Adventist Academy, the Year 10 Home Economics class have been busy cooking and serving meals for community members. On a fortnightly basis, the students plan, prepare and serve the meal to meet the requirements of the curriculum but they add an extra touch by providing dinner entertainment as well. In addition to hospitality, this program builds skills in organisation, event planning, public speaking, decoration and performance. It also provides the students with opportunities to work together towards meaningful goals. Lynden Chester, deputy principal, makes the point that there are many people in the local community who have limited social contact because of age, disability or mobility issues. The Eating with Friends program does more than provide a meal; it offers an opportunity for young and old to chat and form friendships and develops a sense of community belonging.

Chooseday Night

Port Macquarie Adventist School principal Phillip Lillehagen and his team recognise the pressures that young families face and have came up with a unique idea to encourage families to spend time together and build a sense of community. Called Chooseday Night, the school community offers a family night out at the school each Tuesday evening. Families enjoy a low cost meal and the school chaplain runs family friendly activities. Open to any community families, school families often invite friends to this relaxed, low cost family night out. This program helps students and their families to build a sense of community where sharing and support for one another are natural outcomes. Although students are not directly involved in serving the community, they are observing the connectedness of families in a positive way. This modelling of community provides one of the important components of learning to care referred to by Noddings (2005).

1 Eating with Friends

[Photograph: Lynden Chester]

2 Community Service Camp

[Photograph: Scott Camps]

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Year 9 Community Service Camp

Heritage College in Victoria has recently run a Community Service Camp in which they took Year 9 students to a country town for a week. Students were engaged in two different kinds of activities. They visited local primary schools where they used puppetry, music, drama, crafts and games to present life skill programs on topics such as bullying. This type of activity gives the students a shared purpose, helps develop strong communication skills and reinforces the positive message of the programs to the Year 9 students as well as their primary school audiences. The second component of the program was a backyard blitz program where three families received a yard makeover courtesy of the Year 9 students and their teachers. This enabled the students to connect with community in a useful activity and also to practice giving care to others. The satisfaction of achievement was augmented by the thanks and tears of the recipients.

Conclusion

Each of the schools in this article is enthusiastic about their community-focused project. By thinking creatively, staff are modelling care and service as they connect students with their local community. Each student is also encouraged in their service by a sense of satisfaction and by appreciation from community members.

Whatever the size or nature of your school, why not explore ways to help students develop a sense of community responsibility. Whatever the project, large or small, the act of connecting students with their community in positive ways pays dividends now and into the future as students take their place in society as informed, responsible and compassionate citizens. TEACH

References

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