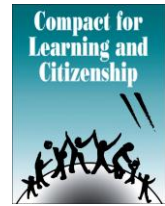


# Issue Paper

## Community Service/Service-Learning



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### “...And Justice for All”

## Community Service-Learning for Social Justice

By Rahima Wade

### Introduction: Why Should Service-Learning Address Social Justice?

Community service-learning, the integration of school or community-based service activities with academic skills and structured reflection, is a growing movement in the field of education nationally. With funding and initiatives at the federal, state and private organizational levels, service-learning programs have proliferated in the nation's K-12 classrooms, as well as in colleges and universities.

Service-learning programs across the country address a variety of valuable student outcomes, from academic achievement to civic responsibility. Program goals may include fostering self-esteem, empathy, problem-solving skills or political efficacy. Depending on the population or issue being addressed through the service-learning activities, program leaders also may endeavor to enhance students' appreciation of diversity or the environment, or expand their awareness of career options.

While quality service-learning programs may meet these and other important student goals, an exclusive focus on such discrete outcomes and competencies limit service-learning's power to effect broad-based changes in both students and the communities in which they serve. Too often, program leaders are more concerned with students' personal, social and academic development than they are with working to create meaningful changes in society. Rarely do students in service-learning programs consider whether some injustice has created the need for service in the first place. Nor do they often address injustice through advocacy or political action.

While meeting individual needs in the community is an important aspect of effective citizenship, democracy depends on citizens' willingness and ability to examine current social problems, evaluate how they have developed over time and consider new directions in creating a better society. An important part of the civic mission of schooling is helping students to understand and work toward the country's creed of "justice for all."

Discussing social justice issues in the classroom can be challenging, given their controversial nature. And working for social justice may involve activities focused on long-term change rather than immediate observable benefits. Yet students who are involved in direct service to others in their communities are in an ideal position to examine the historical precedents of the problems they are addressing and to consider what types of efforts might be necessary beyond direct service to lessen the problems they are witnessing firsthand.

This paper discusses how social justice issues can be integrated into high-quality service-learning programs. Combining community service activities with the study of social issues can give students additional ideas for how they can contribute to meaningful societal change and can strengthen service-learning activities by helping students learn the skills, knowledge and attitudes they need to participate in improving the larger society.

## What Is Social Justice?

Social justice is a term often referred to but rarely defined. Much more has been written about injustice than the nature of social justice. From a historical and academic perspective, however, several well-known philosophers have defined social justice. Aristotle's view of justice was a rule-based distribution of benefits and burdens among society members to achieve a basic level of goodness for all. Philosopher John Rawls also equated justice with fairness, believing justice would result from the following situation: A group of mutually disinterested individuals, unacquainted with their places in society, if given the charge to divide up society's resources, would inevitably arrive at the creation of a just society that would include an equitable distribution of rights and responsibilities and opportunities for self-development for everyone.

More recently, feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan and others at the Harvard Graduate School of Education Center for the Study of Gender, suggest that the notion of social justice cannot be thought of in purely intellectual terms, that it also encompasses care, relationships and responsibility. Andra Makler, a social studies professor at Lewis and Clark College, asserts that at the root of all conceptions of social justice is some sense of an appropriate social structure and respectful relationships among persons, without regard to race, ethnicity, religion, age, physical ability or sexual orientation.

Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin, professors in the Social Justice Education Program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, define a socially just society as one in which all members have their basic needs met. In addition, they note that in a just society all individuals are physically and psychologically safe and secure, able to develop to their full capacities and capable of interacting democratically with others. While people may disagree about how prevalent social justice is in our society and how best to further equity, most Americans will concur that justice is a core value in our democratic society.

## What Are the Essential Elements of Educating for Social Justice?

Social justice education begins with children's experiences and then moves toward fostering a critical perspective and action directed toward social change (Bigelow, et al., 1994). While delineations of social justice education vary, an analysis of the sources used in developing this paper point to eight characteristics as essential elements of effective social justice education:

- *Student-Centered*  
Students need to feel cared for and respected to learn to trust one another, share ideas openly and collaborate on issues of mutual concern. Teachers need to respect students' abilities, interests and opinions, and encourage students to make connections between themselves and the curriculum.
- *Collaborative*  
Effective social justice teachers create a classroom community in which students collaborate with one another to learn, solve problems and mediate conflicts, and effect change. In addition, students should interact with others in the school and community to build equitable partnerships that support mutually shared goals.
- *Experiential*  
Student involvement and engagement in mentally and physically active experiences are essential in the social justice classroom. Through projects, role playing, mock trials, simulations and experiments, students experience concepts and key ideas firsthand, rather than just reading or hearing about them.
- *Intellectual*  
Social justice education is not just about process; it involves real intellectual work on the part of students and teachers. Students engage in inquiry and research as they interview community members, seek out information through the Internet and examine primary sources. Throughout these experiences, students are asked to apply the skills and knowledge of the curriculum as they examine multiple perspectives on a variety of issues.
- *Analytical*  
In searching for ways to create a better world, social justice teachers ask students to critique the status quo, examine underlying assumptions and values, and explore their own roles in relation to social issues. Teachers also ask students to consider whose voices are left out, who makes the decisions, whose stories are buried and how to create change as they uncover various sources of

information. Analyzing the causes of injustice in the school, community, society and world is at the heart of social justice education. Reflection in social justice-oriented service-learning projects addresses the controversial nature of the issues under study and asks students to look at how they may be part of the problem, as well as how they can become part of the solution.

■ *Multicultural*

One aspect of social justice education is concerned with a conscious and consistent focus on including the history and perspectives of all people, including those with different ethnic backgrounds, physical abilities, religious beliefs, genders, sexual orientations and socioeconomic classes. Every social justice issue under study should employ source materials from multiple perspectives. Teachers must be culturally sensitive in terms of their students as well, seeking out advice from colleagues, parents and community members for working most effectively with students who are culturally different than them.

■ *Value-Based*

While educators sometimes like to think of themselves as value-neutral, every classroom decision – from curriculum content to room arrangement to teaching strategies – involves values. The social justice teacher recognizes this fact and welcomes controversy and value-based issues in the curriculum. While respecting students' individual views, teachers also encourage students to come up with reasoned opinions and explain how their ideas support social justice. As Howard Zinn, historian, asserts, it is important for teachers to model the process of taking a stand and sharing their own positions on issues, while reminding students that their opinions, even if different from the teacher's, also are valid.

■ *Activist*

Along with learning about social problems and questioning prevailing practices, students need opportunities to work for social change. In particular, social justice teachers encourage students to work for the rights of those who are dominated or marginalized, such as people of color, individuals with disabilities, those who are poor, the very young and very old, and those whose religions or languages are different from the mainstream society. Students often work alongside individuals who have not enjoyed equal rights for mutual support and empowerment.

## **What Does Service-Learning for Social Justice Look Like?**

High-quality community service-learning activities share many of the same characteristics as social justice education. Educators and policymakers interested in incorporating social justice education can use the eight characteristics delineated above as a template for developing service-learning projects aimed at social justice goals. The table below illustrates what each of the eight characteristics might look like in service-learning practice.

<b>Social Justice Education Characteristics</b>	<b>Examples in Service-Learning Practice</b>
Student-centered	Students are involved in choosing the issue of concern for their service-learning project and asked to explain how this issue connects with their own lives.
Collaborative	Students collaborate with their classmates, others in the school and, most important, service recipients, in the design and conduct of the service-learning project.
Experiential	Students are actively engaged in community needs assessment, research and project development, as well as service activities in the school and/or community.
Intellectual	Students seek out a variety of sources with multiple perspectives as they study and analyze the issue they have chosen. They use subject-matter skills and knowledge to plan and carry out their service-learning project.
Analytical	Students examine the root causes of the problem they are addressing. They consider whose voices have been excluded and what their own role is in relation to the problem.
Multicultural	Students adopt an inclusive approach to the problem they are addressing, in terms of understanding the issue from diverse perspectives and also in terms of whom they involve and how they work together on the problem.
Value-based	Students acknowledge the controversial nature of the problem they are addressing. They examine and discuss the values involved.
Activist	Students engage in direct action, as well as advocacy aimed at creating a more socially just society.

Students question societal issues, consider diverse perspectives and make decisions about ways to effect change. The students are engaged in meaningful academic learning while making significant contributions to their communities, and they collaborate with individuals in the school and community to address controversial and important issues in society.

Experienced service-learning practitioners reading this paper may ask, “So what is the difference between service-learning for social justice and high-quality service-learning? Aren’t the aspects of service-learning discussed what skilled service-learning teachers do anyway?”

Yes and no. Service-learning for social justice emphasizes student initiative and choice, community voice and multiple perspectives. Perhaps most unique is the emphasis placed on examining larger structural issues and the role they play in creating local needs and problems. In practice, many service-learning programs never involve students in considering the root causes of societal inequities or engage students in advocacy beyond direct service. Program leaders and their students often are more comfortable and familiar with direct service or are unfamiliar with resources for teaching and learning about societal issues from broader and diverse perspectives. Advocacy activities, such as letter writing, may be seen as less interesting or personally fulfilling than working one-on-one with persons in need.

Social change efforts may involve less glamour, longer-term effort and, at times, an inability to assess whether one's efforts are making a difference. Yet working for broad-based change allows students to influence more lives than they can through working with single individuals in the local community.

## **Conclusion**

Developing service-learning projects with clear social justice goals is a challenging and important task that will take contributions and input from all stakeholders — teachers, students, administrators, policymakers and community members. Together, they can plan and sustain programs that involve young people in asking important questions and striving to make a difference, not just for individuals in their communities, but also for the larger society. Through active intellectual engagement and advocacy, students can question prevailing norms, come up with new ideas, and put their hearts and minds to work to create a better world.

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## Additional Resources for Service-Learning for Social Justice

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- Dingerson, Leigh, and Hay, Sarah (1998). *The CoMotion Guide to Youth-Led Social Change*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Justice.
- Fleisher, Paul (1993). *Changing Our World: A Handbook for Young Activists*. Tucson, AZ: Zephyr Press.
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Wade, Rahima C. (2001). "Social Action in the Social Studies: From the Ideal to the Real." In *Theory Into Practice*, 40 (1), 23-28.

## Social Justice Education Organizations

Constitutional Rights Foundation

[www.crf-usa.org](http://www.crf-usa.org)

213-487-5590

Educators for Social Responsibility

[www.esrnational.org](http://www.esrnational.org)

800-370-2515

Institute for Democracy in Education

614-593-4531

National Association of Multicultural Education

[www.nameorg.org](http://www.nameorg.org)

202-628-6263

National Coalition of Education Activists

[www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org)

914-876-4580

Rethinking Schools

[www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org)

414-964-9646

Southern Poverty Law Center

[www.teachingtolerance.org](http://www.teachingtolerance.org)

334-264-0268

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