

# Service programs: do they make a difference?

Joseph P. Duffy

A major question in any discussion of service programs is: Do they make a difference? The only honest answer is: It depends.

The National Center for Service-Learning maintains that curriculum-related programs "do enhance learning while enabling students to participate in responsible and productive community service efforts."<sup>1</sup> In a Catholic high school, however, we are looking for something more in the areas of moral growth and personal development. At the very least, we attempt to "foster the integration of religion with the rest of learning and living," to enable "students to address with Christian insight the multiple problems which face individuals and society today," to help "students acquire skills, virtues, and habits of heart and mind required for effective service to others."<sup>2</sup>

In recent years one of the means used to achieve these objectives is the introduction of service programs in Catholic high schools. In many of them, such experience is a requirement for graduation.

What follows presents some findings from a three-year study of the service program at a college-preparatory Catholic high school. During this period student participation was voluntary. In the last quarter of senior year those volunteering were released from class to work with some 88 different agencies. They were required to meet periodically in small discussion groups with faculty members, write three reflection papers and do some related reading. In the most recent year, 1980-1981, 35% of the faculty (28 out of 79) were involved in the program. They met with students three times in the course of six weeks. The students had to read two

assigned books and keep a diary of their experiences.

The motivation of a large number of students for participating was understandable but not always the most commendable. Many mentioned "getting out of school" as the primary factor. But, in general, at the conclusion these same students acknowledged that the service program was valuable and that they had benefited from the experience. Those not involved remained in school for regular classes. A number of those who did not volunteer were enrolled in Advanced Placement or other types of advanced courses, had a poor academic record, or had some other legitimate reason for not participating.

Having both service and non-service groups of students made it possible to assess in some way whether or not the service experience made any difference in making the assessment. Rest's DIT and *Issues Test* (DIT) was used with a pretest-posttest method. Over the three years of testing there were 251 students in service programs and 81 not in them whose pretests and posttests were both valid. Because we wanted to control other variables such as grades, SAT's, family background, etc., we included a questionnaire at the pretest.

The DIT consists of six stories about controversial issues or moral dilemmas. The subject is asked to indicate what the person in the story should do to solve the dilemma; then, to rate 12 reasons on a five-point scale according to their importance; and, finally, to rank order the four he/she considers most important in making the decision. The test yields indices of overall moral judgment as well as Kohlbergian stage scores. We shall be looking particularly at one of these indices, called the Principled morality score or the P% score. According to Rest, this score "has so far been the most useful and reliable index from the

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Father Duffy, S.J., is an assistant professor in the School of Education, Boston College, Massachusetts.

DIT."<sup>4</sup> This index uses information keyed to Post-conventional Stages (5A, 5B, and 6), the levels of human rights and universal principles, and is interpreted as "the relative importance attributed to Principled moral considerations in making a moral decision."<sup>5</sup>

When the data were analyzed, there was a consistent, statistically significant relationship between the PPA score and grades in school, SAT's, and SAT-M. This was not surprising since the DIT is a measure of moral reasoning ability and college-preparatory students in Catholic high schools are generally of above average intelligence.

Comparisons were then made between the pretest and posttest scores of those in service programs and those not involved. There was a statistically significant difference ( $p < .001$ ) between the pretest and posttest PPA scores of those who participated in the service programs. In the case of those who did not engage in these service activities, there was no such significant difference between the pretest and posttest PPA scores.

Although both the service and non-service groups were comparable in terms of reasoning ability, as evidenced by the statistically significant correlations with grades and SAT's, greater growth on the higher levels of moral reasoning, indicated by the PPA score, was found among those in service programs.

On this basis it seems fair to conclude that service programs do make a difference. But then the question arises: To what may the difference be attributed? In this research a number of variables thought to have some relationship to the development of moral reasoning were studied. Among them were: type of schooling at the elementary level—public or Catholic; level of parental education; parental marital status; religion and religious practice; family income; own religious

practice. For the three-year period no statistically significant relationships were found with any of these variables. This led to the conjecture that the difference came from the program itself, from one aspect of the program or from a combination of aspects.

Research evidence from other sources seems to rule out the service experience by itself. Herbert A. Exum, reporting on research using a "deliberate psychological education model," concluded: "Experience-based learning by itself has no noticeable impact on the level of psychological maturity of the pupils, even if the activity itself is highly involving in terms of time commitments. *It appears as if students do not necessarily learn anything simply by experience.*"<sup>6</sup> Gorman supports this view, writing, "Research has...shown that experiences of serving others (elderly, mentally retarded, the sick) are of little value in moving students to a higher level of moral judgment unless the experiences are reflected upon in order that students will see the issues involved and integrate their insights into their perspective."<sup>7</sup>

A general rule in "deliberate psychological education" is that there should be some balance between the actual experience and an opportunity for careful reflection and examination of the meaning of that experience. This is looking at the insufficiency of experience by itself. What about classwork by itself? Three years ago at a Catholic university a pilot study was conducted to examine the development of the level of moral judgment in two types of college courses, both requiring readings, lectures and discussions.<sup>8</sup> One, however, included a service experience as well. The average age of the students, mostly freshmen and sophomores, was 18-18.5, not much older than high school seniors. The DIT was also used in this research on a pretest-posttest basis.

The major finding of the study was that those students with service experience and reflection showed a significantly higher rate of growth than students with reflection on ethical issues but no service experience. In the service-related program students reflected on their experiences through journals and discussion groups. The discussion groups focused on issues that emerged during the field work so that moral dilemmas were discussed as part of the student's own life, in the concrete rather than in the abstract. A better research design would have included three groups—students with only field experience, students with only course work, and a group with both experience and course work. Nevertheless, this pilot study does seem to support the theory that a higher rate of moral growth is achieved through the combination of experience and reflection.

The significance of this combined experience/reflection approach is illustrated in some samples from reflection papers of the students in the Catholic high school study. The importance of faculty involvement in the reflection phase adds still another dimension.

This first sample is by a student placed in a Senior Center, where he did not want to be.

"I...have seen, through working with Seniors, the drawbacks of being old. The fact that one is old is no big deal. The fact that they get the shaft when cutbacks have to be made is. I doubt that there is any group that is more widely ignored and/or discriminated against than they. I often wonder if this is just. Those that hurt old people will be hurt just as badly though when they grow old. That's not fair either. Working with Seniors has definitely helped me see that I, and everyone else, should not tolerate social injustice of any kind. Formerly, when I have seen something unjust happen to me or anyone else, I have ignored

it or let it happen. I see now that this was wrong for me to do, and it won't happen again."

To this the teacher commented: "Good not only because of your insights but also your honesty about your own feelings..." In a discussion group these insights could have been pursued further with such questions as: What are some of the other kinds of injustices you have seen? Why were they unjust? What are some of the positive things you could have done? Why would these actions have been appropriate? As it is, this experience and reflection were clearly more effective than, for instance, simply reading about the White House Conference on Aging in *Time* or *Newsweek*.

Here is another example from a service experience in a hospital setting.

"While working at the hospital, I came in contact with many patients who were old and dying and who were also in pain. It is my opinion that the medical profession does not have the moral right to prolong the lives of these people. A person does have the right to die with dignity and without the shame of being treated as a child. 'They shoot horses, don't they?' Old age is a disease and is worst of all because it draws the life from its victims slowly. It should therefore be treated as such. And what of mercy killing and euthanasia? Are these solutions? Has the medical profession gone beyond its bounds? These are questions to which I have no answer and leave to God to answer."

To which the teacher remarked: "You may not have answers but you are going to have to make some judgments regarding these questions."

These student responses suggest that service programs followed by reflection are ideal for exploring moral issues, and for helping students become aware of what they might do positively and constructively. Gorman supports this

view: "Research has shown that the discussion of moral dilemmas drawn out of personal experiences of the students themselves is more effective than discussions of made-up dilemmas or a dilemma proposed by the teacher."<sup>9</sup> This points up the value of service experiences where students directly encounter instances of injustice and complex moral problems.

The growth in moral awareness that can occur is expressed by a student working with retarded children.

"During 'this experience' I have learned that one is rewarded more fully when he gives himself to others in need. As a child I always thought it was better to receive. At this stage of my life I know now that it is more fulfilling and enriching to give. By giving my time and effort to these retarded children I became more aware of myself and my own capabilities."

This statement highlights another finding, one that is related to an important element in the development of a moral person, namely, that "students who have engaged in service programs consistently report how much the experience has helped their self-esteem....By serving others, students strengthen their own sense of themselves, open their horizons to groups larger than those of their own age and background, and begin to be concerned about justice to groups other than their own."<sup>10</sup>

Are service programs an unqualified success? Not necessarily. Listen to the reflections of a high school senior teaching in a Catholic elementary school.

"My only motivations in field experience were to: 1) keep from attending my regular...classes and 2) look back on my days in my old school....I can honestly say that I had no intention of being a service to the community. I was really just thinking of myself....For me the whole quarter has been somewhat 'forgettable'."

With a student as candid as this, some dialogue about his views on this experience might be appropriate and helpful in terms of his personal development.

Despite inconsistencies in students' responses, the service program experience is an increasingly important element in the moral development of Catholic high school students. Although there are many models of service programs which may be adapted to local circumstances, clearly the program should be structured and carried out in a way that promises to yield maximum benefits.

The results of the three-year study described here, as in research being conducted elsewhere, indicate that student reflection and discussion and active faculty involvement are essential ingredients for genuine moral growth and for service programs to make a difference.

## Notes

1. National Center for Service-Learning, "National Survey of High School Student Community Service Programs," Washington, 1980, mimeographed.
2. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *To Teach as Jesus Did*, Washington, United States Catholic Conference, 1975, pp. 29-30.
3. James R. Rest, *Manual for the Defining Issues Test*, University of Minnesota, 1974, mimeographed.
4. *Ibid.*
5. James R. Rest, *Developmental Stages of Moral Issues*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1979, p. 101. DePaul's Chapter 8 is another reliable index; the DIT index. This more recently developed index uses information keyed to the Pre-conventional and Conventional as well as the Post-conventional Stages.
6. Herbert A. Exum, "Ego Development Using Curriculum to Facilitate Growth," *Character Potential*, November, 1980, vol. 9, p. 216.
7. Margaret Gorman, "Moral Education and Social Justice," in *Readings in Social Justice Education* (tentative title), Padraic O'Hare, ed., Maryknoll: Orbis Books, in press.
8. Margaret Gorman, Joseph P. Duffy and Margaret Heffernan, "The Effect of Service Experience on the Moral Development of College Students," *Character Potential*, in press.
9. Gorman, in press.
10. Gorman, in press.