

The Thirst for Connection: Preparing Future Teachers for a Service Profession

by Malissa A. Scheuring-Leipold, Ed.D.¹

It is believed that those of us drawn to the teaching career have a stronger inclination to the social order. Coulter (1987) reported that students of education place more value on and have a stronger commitment to people and personal relationships than non education majors. Morrison and McIntyre (1973) also testified that teachers are more people-oriented than persons in most other occupational groups, and noted that teachers also place less value than others on economic success. It follows then that teachers appear to be more interested in establishing and maintaining helping relationships than in how much they earn (Powell 1992). Therefore, the researchers, for the most part, view educators as social beings who are more concerned with the individual, the other, and are rarely centered on money and worldly status. This must remain true today, even in this world which seems so centered on the *self*. There are, undoubtedly, still those who desire to *do* for the other, or more so, *with* the other, to improve situations, dispositions and to assist others in their personal and educational advancement.

Along with this inclination comes a lot of self-reflection; self-reflection because we are constantly questioning our effectiveness, as are those with whom we work. We as professional educators confront more uncertainty than the majority as we are surrounded by young minds, and adventure is inevitable. In these daily dealings and experiences we consistently are faced with the questions: Why, How, and What can I do to improve my effectiveness? For it is in grappling with these questions that we grow and become fulfilled in our teaching careers.

Teachers are not only social beings but also role models for their students and society as a whole. True teachers care about humanity as they are empathetic and sympathetic, and are inclined to place others' needs before their own. They do their best to treat all people with dignity, kindness and respect. Teachers are also inclined to be hard workers and challenged to be living examples of all that is good and pure of heart. They tend to keep a grounded knowledge base as they face the uncertainty of each day. As a group, teachers are noted for giving back through service, even outside of the classroom.

I continue to live in awe of those teachers who make the daily effort to be an interested and caring person. But how is it that we can pass this desire on and keep it alive especially among young educators? In my preparing future teachers, I have witnessed that as with self-confidence, the awareness of the service foundation of the educator diminishes for some students

¹Dr. Malissa A. Scheuring-Leipold taught on elementary and secondary levels, and was an administrator in middle school and high school settings. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Education at Iona College in New Rochelle, NY, specializing in Educational Leadership.

as they engage in field experiences such as student teaching. The shock and demands of actual classroom experience may account for an attitudinal change. Although disconcerting, it is important to recognize that reality shock probably occurs in every profession. It is our responsibility as the mentors of these future educators to prepare them for and help them through this possible period of disenchantment and assist them in making the social aspects of teaching a reality from the start.

When questioning education students as to why they have personally chosen to become teachers, the majority say that it is because of a teacher they once had who made a long-lasting impression upon them, and perhaps even changed their lives for the better. What wonderful witness opportunities for teachers! However, when educators are asked to articulate their personal motivation for educating day in and day out, few say it is because they are fulfilled by serving others. Yet the researchers claim that the desire to serve others is a common characteristic of teachers. We must imbue into our education of students, this desire to focus on the *other* in an ongoing way and continually reinforce this as a foundation of the teaching career.

Several of my students have volunteered their time over the course of the semesters to take part in various outreaches. It is simply amazing to witness the transformation occurring within these individuals as they have exercised their service spirit. One sophomore student expressed that every time she volunteered, she experienced an ever increasing desire to serve. She admitted to not participating in community service when in high school, and is thrilled that she now has seen how important it is to give back to the community. Another student in her service with poor in New York City had the realization that not everyone has the opportunity to eat three meals a day, which is something she had previously taken for granted as commonplace. On one occasion, she heard a volunteer asking a young boy what he desired most. He simply said "food," which brought tears to her eyes because she had never expected a little boy to have such an answer in lieu of toys or new clothes.

For educators of future teachers, addressing the service component of teaching may be as important as instilling intellectual knowledge. I have often heard it remarked that one may only remember a small portion of the plethora of information to which they were exposed during their formal schooling years. Instead what they remember most is how to learn. It is the experience that is retained. As social beings, future educators thirst for a connection between the material presented to them and the human person whom they are to serve. For a teacher this connection is key. It is of no service to others if one has intellectual knowledge but yet cannot communicate this knowledge to another or utilize it in any manner. This is where the service component comes into play for an education student's professional development. They are now being given the opportunity in working with others, to verbalize and take action to better someone's situation and hopefully instill them with increased knowledge. It is critical that both knowledge and service are addressed, since intellectual knowledge gained and not shared is unproductive.

It is through the avenue of service that teachers often perform a vital democratic role, insofar as they are often the point of contact between the mainstream society and disadvantaged groups and individuals who may exist at the margins of society. It is so easy to get caught up in one's own concerns and needs in our demanding and fast-paced world. Unless we are led somehow to give attention to the marginalized, it is often simply human nature to overlook them. As educators of future teachers, it becomes imperative that we imbue within our students a sense

of care for the plight of their fellow human being. Teachers can create the room for reflection on how to reach out, how to improve the lives of the less fortunate, and recognize and serve the needs that one is able to. It's a tall order for a teacher in a classroom, but a worthy goal. Future teachers will encounter students of all socioeconomic status, backgrounds and circumstances. It is their duty to serve them equitably and to meet their individual needs as best they can, drawing on the knowledge and experience gained in their own education courses. Through the service learning component, they may very well gain more confidence in knowing how to recognize, be comfortable with and meet diverse needs of their students in an effective manner. It is the affective aspect of learning to be a teacher that will foster the democratic spirit.

Service to and with others is not just something to be talked about and prepared for in the formal classroom setting. The latent service attitude of a future teacher needs to be acted upon and developed in an ongoing fashion before they set foot that first day in their own classrooms. Service experiences build strength of character and lay the foundation for those characteristics of a dedicated teacher. Hands on service to those in need provides a learning experience that will affect all other relationships. They will discover that they indeed have much to offer others and that as they see their occupation, their career, as a service they will be fulfilled in the fact that what they have to offer has neither limits nor boundaries.

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