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## Embedding Service in Teacher Education

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*Becky Kreidler, Loyola University Chicago*

The most impactful organizations, clubs, and programs implement service into their missions with the intent of teaching their members the value of helping others. Being connected to local communities is especially important for individuals involved in professions of public service. Without understanding the local context in which they work, they cannot effectively serve community members. Research has revealed the power of preservice educators engaging in service. In a study of preservice educator experiences in service learning, participants reported an increased self-awareness and feeling of empowerment as a result of their service (Chen, 2003). This connection to community is imperative for educators because the places where their students live shape their learning experiences just as much as, and oftentimes more than, classrooms.

Chen (2003) notes: “Blending service with learning enables the implementation of a key purpose of using service learning in instruction—to provide learners with real world, meaningful experiences to enhance their content learning and, at the same time, provide a useful service to the community” (p. 32). There is little doubt that it is both a powerful and essential experience for teachers to engage with local communities in order to enhance cultural responsiveness, yet many misconceptions about what community involvement and outreach truly looks like often cloud these experiences. Only when these preexisting impressions are acknowledged can intentional service take place that can leave a lasting impact on educators and their likelihood to engage in the future. It was only through action and personal reflection that I came to truly understand what service meant, rather than just participate in it. Through my reflections, I worked with my team at Loyola Future Teachers Club (LFTC) to implement meaningful service for future educators at Loyola University Chicago in order help our members grow, spread this impact to future generations of teachers, and most importantly, be present in the lives of students in our communities.

My history of service involvement has been shaped by many experiences; yet my journey of coming to understand service has been shaped by relationships, most of which were truly unexpected. Jean Vanier founded L’Arche, a network of intentional living communities for adults with special needs, rooted in the Christian faith. Inspired by his spirituality and the ever-changing familial structures of the late 20th century, Vanier

sought to build a home founded on relationships for a group too often misunderstood in society.

In May 2015, I had the opportunity to live with one such L'Arche community in Clinton, Iowa. Organized by my university's campus ministry program, a group of seven women road-tripped to Iowa not knowing quite what to expect. What attracted me to this trip? Well, it was listed as an immersion experience and was recommended for education majors, but it wasn't my first choice. In fact, upon being notified of my trip assignment, I was disappointed and frustrated. I was expecting to go to New York to work with students affected by urban poverty. Iowa didn't sound as impactful as compared to the work that could be done in the highly concentrated metropolis of New York and its urban public school system. At that time I knew I was caught up in the disappointment of the moment and reminded myself of the standard platitude, "Everything happens for a reason," but what I couldn't see at the time was how blinded I was by society's conceptions of community.

Now reflecting back upon my community involvement, I have come to understand how these notions were shaped by two educational experiences. When I was in eighth grade preparing to be confirmed, we were required to complete a specific number of service hours before we could receive the sacrament. I found myself with this same prerequisite when I was a junior in high school preparing to become a member of the National Honor Society: Service hours were required. This seems beneficial, right? Encouraging students to get involved in their communities by interweaving service into the process. Yet, I believe this promotes a different kind of message, that service is a temporary task to be completed. When I volunteered my time playing violin in church and helping in my middle school library, I truly did enjoy myself and the connections I made with others. However, I was not fully in tune with those realizations because my focus revolved around coming home to log those hours and receive credit for my completed service.

These requirements, though not their intent, shaped my ideas of what community involvement looks like, which left a lasting impression on my understanding of service. In looking back on my L'Arche experience, I came to understand why this service immersion was so different from what I had engaged in before. I spent one week with the members of the Clinton L'Arche community, and yet, those are some of the most important and transformative relationships I have built in my life. Community members who did not know my name showed me the most love I have ever experienced. I was not providing a service to this community. They instead welcomed me into new relationships and gave more to me than I will ever be able to describe in words.

Yet, despite my realization, these earlier perceptions of what community and service look like are still alive and thriving in society today. Community provokes the image of people of different ethnicities holding hands, working together for a greater cause. However, in practice, community looks different; community is a struggle, an effort that can't be "completed" in a day, or any set time period, for that matter. Community is about relationships.

In fact, the importance of relationships can best be exemplified in my L'Arche experiences. Over the course of the week, we met many community members living in

the three houses of the L'Arche community. One evening we celebrated a community member's birthday. There was a festive celebration for Janice, and it was heartwarming to see all the community members prepare for the celebration, but even more entertaining was to hear Janice talk about her birthday. She kept reminding people of her party, just to be sure everyone possible would be in attendance. When that night came, we all went to the church community room where L'Arche community members, friends, church members, staff, and family were all present. It was just like any other birthday party filled with good food, laughter, and party hats, until something that can only be described as beautiful took place. Each member gave affirmations to Janice. Some talked about her smile, another mentioned her funny jokes, the next talked about how nice she was. One member even asked her on a date to Subway! As more and more people stood up to offer affirmations, tears began to well up in my eyes. It was incredible to hear the "simple" compliments that Janice's community members shared with her. But you could tell by the smile on Janice's face that this was anything but simple. Pure happiness radiated from her; she looked as though she had been handed the whole world.

What struck me most was the unyielding love that poured from the community members' hearts. Their words were so rooted in warmth and their relationships with Janice were so profound that the simplicity of the words did not matter. Rather, their message could clearly be seen in the bond of that community. In fact, their simple words spoke more profoundly to me than anything I had ever heard before.

My perceptions of community were first challenged before I even experienced L'Arche, when Fr. Greg Boyle came to speak at Loyola University Chicago in March 2015. Fr. Boyle is the founder of Homeboy Industries, a program in Los Angeles, California which aids former gang members through education, rehabilitation, and employment. In an interview with Krista Tippett, he echoes a similar message that spoke to me on that March evening in Loyola's Madonna Della Strada Chapel:

*"The truth is, it's mutual and that, as much as we are called to bridge the distance that exists between us, we have to acknowledge that there's a distance even in service. You know, a service provider, you're the service recipient and you want to bridge even that so that you can get to this place of utter mutuality. And I think that's where the place of delight is, you know, that I've learned everything of value really in the last 25 years from precisely the people who you think are on the receiving end of my gifts and talent and wisdom, but quite the opposite. It's mutual." ("Transcript for Greg Boyle," 2013, para. 13)*

Fr. Boyle's words sparked great reflection in me. I never thought of service as a two-way street—a mutual experience rooted in a shared relationship. Perhaps this was a result of never experiencing intentional, meaningful service firsthand. In fact, the word itself is contradictory. It suggests that one is providing a service to another. One person in the relationship is giving and the other receiving, implying that the giver is more important, more worthy, and more significant because of their contribution to the lesser. Yet, Fr. Boyle directly challenges this notion, emphasizing that community knows no social, racial, or financial labels. Community offers a space of mutual sharing for human beings. His message spoke to me not only as a person but a future educator. The

relationship between teacher and student is one that has been defined by society for some time now, yet one is not necessarily superior to the other. Learning is not intellectual, but experiential, a mutual component of the human condition.

At Loyola University Chicago, the School of Education acknowledges our urban context and works to provide undergraduate and graduate students with opportunities to challenge their conceptions about education through experiencing a wide variety of classrooms throughout Chicago Public Schools. Noel (2010) notes:

*"To be a more meaningful part of the commitment to the development of teachers who are more authentically connected to community, teacher education programs must respond by transforming their focus and strategies to work more intimately with their urban communities and community-based organizations. In doing so, urban teacher education can move toward a more democratic form of education with input from all involved." (p. 11)*

This goal is at the very heart of the recent curriculum update in Loyola University Chicago's undergraduate teacher education program. In fact, this very aspect of education is a central reason why many individuals go into the teaching profession. In a study of an urban education program at a private school in California, researchers asked 20 preservice teacher candidates to explain why they wanted to teach in urban schools. Fourteen participants discussed the desire to create positive change. Twelve answered with ideas about being a role model and giving back to communities. Seven discussed notions of addressing society's needs (Borrero, 2011). These motivations for teaching are significant as they further highlight the deep connection between schools and communities. After all, schools are major institutions within local communities. This is only one of many reasons why LFTC has community outreach as a core pillar of its mission and work in Chicagoland and greater Illinois communities.

LFTC is a small branch of the Illinois Education Association Student Program (IEASP), directly affiliated with the Illinois Education Association and the National Education Association. Following these larger associations' examples, we have taken on three pillars: teacher quality, community outreach, and political action. While each is equally important to the development of our organization and experience of our members, community outreach is undoubtedly the area LFTC has seen the most growth in during the 2016-2017 school year. This progress is evident in the creation of a community outreach coordinator on our executive board, as well as the many events we have organized in hopes of providing our fellow members with meaningful ties to our surrounding community.

For example, the LFTC volunteers each year with the Edgewater Chamber of Commerce's annual Edgewater Back to School 5K. In 2016, local students and community members ran or walked to support 11 local schools. One LFTC freshman offered a reflection from that day:

*"The outreach projects from LFTC really helped me to feel connected to my Chicago community and the teacher community. The Back to School 5K was very exciting, but at the same time, very comforting. I loved seeing the way the Rogers Park community meshed together. I worked with a wonderful woman who had no kids of her own but wanted to see the community participating in something that would benefit kids. That really inspired me to take part in more events and more community outreach."*

Each LFTC member who volunteered at this event discussed how positive it was for kicking off the school year. In addition to those cheering on the sidelines, we also had members run the race. Running alongside and cheering on students from our partner schools proved to be an important experience for connecting not only with the Rogers Park and Edgewater communities, but also with the very schools in which Loyola teacher candidates spend their time. This direct connection served as a starting point for building meaningful relationships.

Our community outreach events continued into the semester, when in late October LFTC served alongside Loyola Water Tower Campus Ministry in their Labre Homeless Ministry program. This program is composed of Loyola students accompanied by peer leaders who direct students on a route down city streets with a cooler filled with food to share with homeless people in Chicago. Labre is a ministry focused on solidarity, rather than charity. Similar to Jean Vanier's mission, this is a ministry of presence. When discussing her involvement in the event, one student said: "Participating in Labre Homeless Ministry with LFTC was very special. We met many individuals experiencing homelessness and were inspired by their strength and positivity. We showed our solidarity with them through conversation and food."

In a reflection session that followed, many LFTC members made direct connections to the teaching profession. We discussed how many people we talked with that night were in need of someone to confide in, someone to hear their stories. As future educators, we reflected upon how many students need to share their stories and be heard. By being attentive to those in our community, LFTC members gained a new perspective on the power of presence.

At the end of the fall semester, the LFTC executive board applied for a service grant from the IEASP, and were rewarded with monetary support to provide a literacy night for a local public school. Through many months of planning, LFTC members went to Ebenezer Lutheran Church in late April to donate a new set of library books to their tutoring program. After delivering books to Ebenezer, one student reflected, "Not only was it amazing to be awarded with the service-learning grant, but it was even better to see that money put to good use. What made this such a meaningful experience was witnessing the joy in all the kids' faces when they were presented with the books we bought with the grant money. I'm so happy we were able to be a part of this." Through the support of the IEASP, we were able to aid Ebenezer Lutheran Church through educational materials. Yet, the relationships built that day, the stories read and smiles shared, are what made that night not just memorable, but impactful.

These and many other community outreach events are the result of meaningful planning, reflections, and a focus on social justice. LFTC has worked to provide future educators with the experiences and relationships with community members to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation for reaching out to one's community. Vanier (1989) writes:

*"We are called to do not extraordinary things, but very ordinary things. Very often, we tend to look for "great" moments or beautiful and ecstatic celebrations. We forget that the best nourishment of community life, the one which renews and opens our hearts, is in all the small gestures of fidelity, tenderness, humility, forgiveness, sensitivity, and welcome which make up everyday life. It is these which are at the heart of community and can bring us to a realization of love. It is these which touch hearts and reveal gifts." (1989,*

*p. 288, 300)*

Our work at Loyola University Chicago is not headline news. It is ordinary. Yet, as Vanier reflects, the relationships we build out of love are what prove to be truly impactful. It was through my experience at L'Arche, founded upon these intentional words, where I first saw what Fr. Boyle talked about in action. I take this same feeling of sharing life through mutual connections with me when I go out into the community as a student, as an individual to build lasting relationships, but especially as an educator. The small moments that have redefined my understanding of service have motivated me to always be active in my local community for the benefit of my students and their families. I am sure that as my story progresses, new relationships will come to mold what service means to me. It is with an open perspective that I welcome these new possibilities while inviting and challenging my peers to reflect upon their understandings of service, rather than simply participating in community events, inside and outside of the classroom.

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