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Student Voices, Global Echoes: Service-Learning and the Gifted

Alice W. Terry

Implementing service-learning programs in schools for our gifted may help nurture the development of more highly moral people. Service-learning, a method by which students learn and develop through curriculum integration and active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that address needs in their community, has three levels: community service, community exploration, and community action. Community action, most appropriate for gifted youth, involves a high degree of service that produces a broad community impact and the highest degree of learning. This article discusses case studies of four gifted, middle-grade students who participated in community action service-learning projects that positively impacted both the community and the students. Could service-learning be helpful in creating more people like Thoreau and Gandhi by developing co-cognitive traits in gifted youth?

A group of gifted sixth graders, the RIPPLES Gang, and their teacher sat around the table where they first had discussed the plan to revitalize their town a year earlier. By now a discount drugstore chain had looked at the city council's survey and decided to open a store in the small, rural Georgia town. A supermarket chain also was coming. Two historic buildings the students researched and fought to restore were being renovated.

'What have you learned from all this?' their teacher asked. 'That you have to care enough to do something,' replied Julinna. (Henderson, 1987, p. 46)

The RIPPLES Gang received a Public Service Award from the Department of the Interior for their service-learning project and their outstanding efforts to revitalize their town. On September 26, 1986, the RIPPLES Gang and their teacher walked onto the stage of a large auditorium in Washington, DC, before 300 spectators.

Donald P. Hodel, Secretary of the Interior, read a proclamation: 'This group of perceptive, energetic young people proved the educational system can make a dynamic contribution to the preservation movement and inspire the teamwork necessary to promote change. For their creativity, ingenuity, and perseverance...the RIPPLES and their inspiring instructor, Alice Terry, are granted the Public Service Award of the Department of the Interior'.

When the applause and standing ovation came, so did Alice Terry's tears. Surrounded by her students, she knew that everyone can make a difference. Kids too. We only have to try. (Henderson, 1987, p. 46)

Renzulli (2002) asked what causes some people to use their intellectual, motivational, and creative assets in ways that make a positive difference in the world, whereas others with similar traits become involved in more self-serving enterprises. What can we, as a society, do to produce more individuals like Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, Rachel Carson, and Martin Luther King? Implementing service-learning programs in schools for our gifted students is one method that might help.

THE HISTORY OF SERVICE IN AMERICA

Service-learning's roots can be traced to community service, a concept that is not new to America. People helping other people is a tradition in America. Generations of Americans have answered the call to service both at home and overseas. They have offered their time, their resources, and, most importantly, their compassion (Kinsley, 1992).

In the formative years when America was primarily an agrarian society, people helping each other was an integral part of the social fabric. Barn building was a social event in the community with everyone helping with the barn raising and enjoying it immensely. Young people were aware of their roles and learned very early to contribute to their community.

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In the early 1900s, William James promoted the idea of national service through a nonmilitary, government-sponsored program in which all young men would be conscripted into service to work in foundries, fishing fleets, and coal mines. In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt instituted the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in order to pull the country out of the Great Depression. Over 3 million unemployed young men served their country building bridges, national parks, and buildings throughout America until 1942 (Wade, 1997).

Throughout the 1930s, progressives such as John Dewey promoted schools that incorporated the values of social reform and emphasized social and cooperative activities. Connecting schools to community service also was encouraged by William Kilpatrick in the waning years of World War II when he suggested that learning take place in settings outside classroom walls and involve efforts to meet real community needs (Conrad & Hedin, 1991).

Connecting schools to community service is widely known today as service-learning: a method by which students learn and develop through curriculum integration and active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that address needs in their community. Providing structured time for students to think, talk, or write about what they did and observed during a service activity, service-learning also provides opportunities for participants to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities. These activities enhance teaching in school by extending student learning into the community and helping to foster a sense of caring for others (Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform, 1993).

In November 1990, President George H. Bush signed the first service-learning legislation into law. This legislation, the National and Community Service Act of 1990, created the Commission on National and Community Service. In 1993, President Bill Clinton championed the National and Community Service Trust Act that created the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Service-learning has received prominence in the national educational agenda in recent years. Supported by liberals and conservatives alike, service-learning has generated and continues to generate much interest and support.

According to Madeline Kunin, former deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, service-learning can resurrect idealism, compassion, and altruism. She stated, "We cannot survive as a nation unless we hold onto these qualities and teach them to our children" (Fiske, n.d., p. 38). Idealism, compassion, and altruism are all qualities needed in our gifted leaders of tomorrow.

DEVELOPMENT OF CO-COGNITIVE TRAITS IN THE GIFTED

Silverman (1994) found that the higher the child's IQ, the earlier moral concerns develop. Terman found that emotional

stability, social adjustment, and moral characteristics are intermingled with advanced cognition (cited in Silverman). According to Nelson (1989), Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration reinforced this line of thought. Dabrowski examined human personality as it expressed itself in eminent individuals and the developmental process from *what is* to *what ought to be*. He labeled behaviors as ranking from egocentric at one end of a continuum to altruistic at the reverse end. According to Dabrowski, developmental potential is the underlying principle that provides continuity between his postulated five levels. He observed that the most creative and gifted individuals exhibited higher levels of empathy, sensitivity, moral responsibility, self-reflection, and autonomy of thought than the general population (cited in Nelson).

Dabrowski viewed the five dimensions of the TPD as forms of psychic overexcitability, adding that overexcitabilities (OEs) contribute to psychological development (Piechowski, 1986). According to Piechowski, Dabrowski emphasized intellectual, emotional, and imaginal OEs, viewing them as necessary for personal growth that is characterized by moral questioning, existential concerns, and self-judgment. In this development, a person works on inner psychic transformation and makes extensive efforts to overcome his or her lower propensities and, instead, follow ideals. The greater the strength of the OEs, the greater the developmental potential for living an ethical and compassionate life. The more intense and sustained the effort toward development, the more it produces highly moral individuals and spiritual leaders. This begs the question in education: With the appropriate stimulus, might it be possible to instill the moral qualities of idealism, compassion, and altruism in gifted youth?

CONSIDERATIONS IN THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED STUDENTS

What should be taken into consideration when planning programs for gifted students? According to Roeper (1992), an environment in which young children are kept from developing feelings of being on the outside or being separated from the world should be established. She proposed that we create an environment that preserves the uniqueness of young children while "accepting their integration into the larger global ambience, just as the heart is a distinct organ within the body" (p. 52). She recognized that both societal attitudes and the educational process create a separation between children and their world. Cooperation, she stressed, is needed in order for children to be fully integrated into the community. "Only if we can bring about the change in attitude will we save our globe and create the safe world our children are entitled to inherit" (Roeper, 1992, p. 93).

According to Passow (1995), not only do schools need to design and implement learning opportunities within the

classroom, but they also should identify learning resources and opportunities in the community that can be integrated into the classroom. He pointed out that school seldom provides gifted students with opportunities beyond the classroom. Passow (1989) promoted curricula with strong affective and process components that complement cognitive components. He saw this as necessary in helping gifted adolescents become more sensitive to community problems and needs.

According to Renzulli (2002), gifted young people need opportunities, resources, and encouragement for firsthand investigative or creative experiences within their self-selected areas of interest. He postulated that strategies used to develop giftedness in young people should give as much attention to the co-cognitive conditions of development (such as optimism, courage, romance with a topic, sensitivity to human concerns, physical/mental energy, and vision/sense of destiny) as we currently give to cognitive development.

How can we help to sensitize gifted students to problems in their communities, in society, in the world? How do we guide gifted youth toward higher levels of moral development and self-actualization? How can we help gifted youth reach Dabrowski's Level IV, Organized Multilevel Disintegration, so that they can attain self-actualization? We need to offer them opportunities to exhibit high levels of responsibility, authenticity, reflective judgment, empathy for others, autonomy of thought and action, self-awareness, and other characteristics of self-actualization (Nelson, 1989).

Advanced levels of service-learning have been shown to provide gifted students with opportunities to exhibit high levels of creativity, responsibility, reflective judgment, self-awareness, empathy for others, and autonomy of thought and action, in addition to other characteristics of self-actualization. Not only does service-learning have the capability of helping the gifted reach their creative potential as they seek creative solutions to society's ever-increasing challenges, it also has been shown to be an effective, differentiated curriculum for instruction with the gifted, and to help gifted students stretch toward self-actualization (Terry, 2001, 2003).

CLASSIFICATIONS OF SERVICE LEARNING

There are three levels of service-learning: community service, community exploration, and community action. The initial degree of involvement is *community service*. Participating primarily in volunteerism, the students at this level of development perceive issues that are individual rather than societal (see Figure 1). Community service service-learning, although tied to the school curriculum and involving a high degree of service, produces a lesser degree of learning. Activities at this level include working with senior citizens or in daycare centers, tutoring, and picking up litter on highways.

The next level of service-learning is *community exploration*. At this level, students go out into the community or elements of the community come into the school, and information from the real world is shared and explored. In community exploration, students explore, research, and connect a selected classroom topic to a similar issue in their community, and then apply the acquired knowledge in a resourceful manner. Community exploration also can include activities such as internships, outdoor/environmental education programs, and other types of experiential education (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2004).

The highest level of service-learning, and the one most appropriate for gifted students, *community action*, involves students not only becoming aware of, exploring, and becoming engaged in their community but also involves positive community impact. Students become empowered to make a real difference in the world. They analyze the area of community concern, generate new ideas, and implement a plan of action to address the area of concern. In the process, the students develop complex problem solving skills, advanced communication skills, the ability to connect knowledge across the disciplines, and the perseverance to overcome obstacles (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2003). Activities can include civic reform, such as legislative initiatives and health and human services; professional services, such as historic nominations and grant writing; and community enhancement, such as cultural and aesthetic ventures and environmental improvements. Community action involves a high degree of service, producing a broader community impact and the highest degree of learning (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2004), making it ideal for involvement by gifted students (see Figure 1).

CASE STUDIES

The following case studies involved gifted middle-grade students who participated in community action service-learning projects that positively impacted both the community and the students. They were reported previously in earlier studies and are used here as illustrations of the potential impact of high levels of service-learning on gifted adolescents. *Listen* closely to the student voices, and *hear* the global echoes.

The SWaMP Project

Starting out as a simple recycling venture, the service-learning project conducted by the SWaMP Kids (1994) lasted for 3 years and created very dramatic results in the community. The students ultimately ended up writing a 750-page, state-approved Solid Waste Management Plan for their county. Because of their work, the county landfill that was scheduled for closure remained open—a circumstance, that saved the county and its residents both trouble and

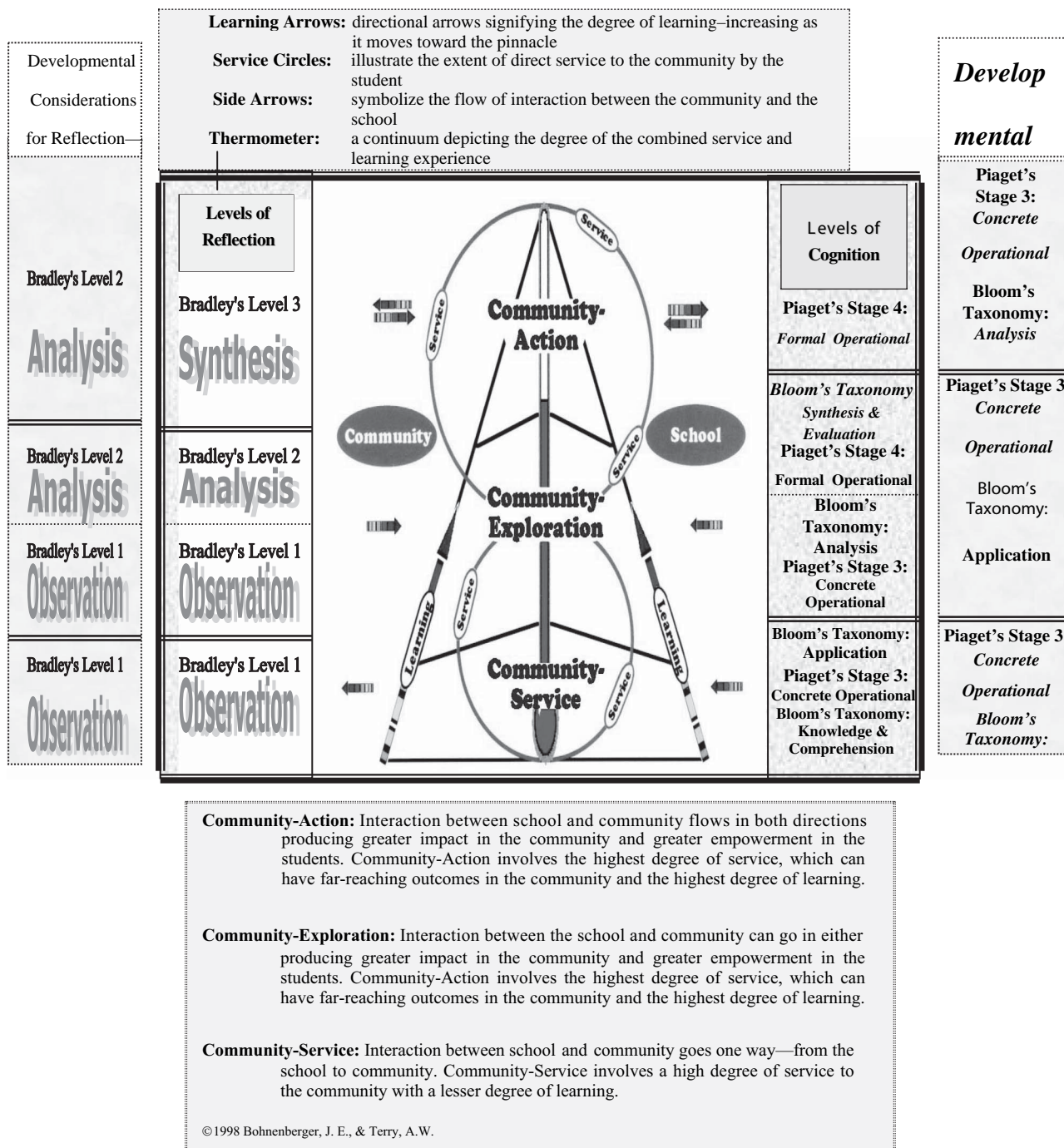


FIGURE 1 K-12 development service-learning typology.

money. The group received a Presidential Environmental Youth Award, and several of the students were guests on the *Phil Donahue Show*, which highlighted children who have made a difference.

Kat. Kat was the facilitator, the leader, of the SWaMP project. Sometimes there were problems between the other SWaMP Kids and Kat that created tension and

frustration. The others kids would become very frustrated—with *Kat!* Kat is a highly gifted individual who skipped two grade levels in school; she is, however, not a patient person. What did Kat learn from her participation in service-learning? According to Kat, she learned about teamwork. She learned, not necessarily to like everyone on the team, but to tolerate her teammates. As Kat expressed,

I used to just blow up at people...I guess we were working in such close quarters that, you know, if somebody that you didn't like was there, they were going to breathe on you at some point. You were going to have to put up with it. (Terry, 2001, p. 126–127)

A strong leader with somewhat bossy tendencies, Kat learned the invaluable lesson of patience and respect for viewpoints and learning styles that differed from her own (Terry, 2001).

Oftentimes with highly gifted, strong-willed children like Kat, putting them in cooperative groups to do classwork is not effective in teaching the skills and value of cooperation and collaboration. With their strong personalities, they often take over a group and dictate what is to be done and how it will be done. In a class activity, the group members usually concede and do as they are directed by bossy classmates like Kat because they have learned that it is easier. They have also learned that students like Kat will get them a good grade if they just do as they are told.

High-level service-learning projects usually last months, and some like the one in which Kat was involved, can last years. In this level of service-learning, it is essential that students cooperate and collaborate in order to accomplish their goals. Initially this can cause uncomfortable classroom confrontations (Terry, 2001); ultimately, most students grow while learning the invaluable skills and importance of cooperation and collaboration. How can we survive on this planet if we don't prepare our most able minds to cooperate and collaborate—to truly respect one another?

Students develop a sense of community through service-learning. They get an early glimpse of what the real world is like while developing a personal interest in their community. Kat's remarks below give us insight into what service-learning ultimately can mean to gifted students who are involved.

I think we got an early glimpse of what a career is really like because...we had a personal interest in what we were writing...I think that that in itself made us all realize that we were doing something kind of ahead of our time, yet we were doing a good job at it. And, for me, it was, like, hey, this is what having a job's really like. And for us I think it was like having a job that you love and you have a personal interest in. And, as seventh graders, I mean, none of our friends had any clue, you know? I look back on that, and they were still listening to New Kids on the Block and starting to dye their hair, and we're trying to save Franklin County and . . . we really got an early glimpse. (cited in Terry, 2001, p. 133)

Kat continued to advocate for the environment long after the SWaMP project ended. Several years after the conclusion of the SWaMP project, Kat went head to head with Fieldale Farms Corporation, a large poultry company. She was instrumental in preventing a dumping site for poultry by-product sludge from locating in her community. She also helped another group of citizens near her college fight a

regional landfill development plan because of environmental concerns (Bohnenberger & Terry, 2002). Through her participation in service-learning, Kat learned how to solve problems and cooperate and collaborate with others, and she used these skills to positively impact her community.

Harwood's Helpers

Imagine being able to distinguish a Corinthian column from an Ionic or Doric Column at the age of 12. With the motto "Helping Harwood is our concern," 28 students at Harwood County Middle School took their town by storm. Calling themselves the Harwood's Helpers, these seventh-grade gifted students became experts on the history and architecture of their small town, and then they took their expertise to the streets (Joiner, 1999). Their service-learning project involved partnering with the city of Harwood to encourage people to frequent the downtown area in order to build up business and to encourage an appreciation of the historical structures of the downtown area.

Aaron. A small, wiry, fast-talking member of Harwood's Helpers, Aaron was selected for a research study as a disconfirming participant of this service-learning project. Though not officially diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), Aaron exhibited characteristics of AD/HD. Home-schooled through fourth grade, Aaron's mother expressed that had he been in school, he probably would have been on Ritalin as early as kindergarten. The freedom of the service-learning class definitely appealed to this energetic, young boy. According to his mother, it also was a very maturing experience in which he developed a deep level of understanding and strong feelings towards his community. As she stated, "I think, having done his research on it and participated in the different things, that he has gone to another level...It's not just all that's right here on this plane; there are other planes to look at" (Terry, 2001, p. 136).

Ms. Smith, Aaron's teacher, was surprised with how positive Aaron was about the service-learning experience in the interviews. The field notes are reflective of Aaron's presence in the classroom.

[Ms. Smith] begins talking to group—one boy [Aaron] asks, "When are we doing reading? This is a reading class, huh?"

Ms. [Smith]: You know this is a reading-skills class, but we don't do that specifically.

[Aaron] starts singing out loud, being disruptive.

Ms. [Smith]: [Aaron], stop that!

And [Aaron] responds, "I'm just singing!" [Aaron] is not listening—sitting with knee in desk—begins humming again. (Terry, 2003, pp. 303–304)

In the interviews, Aaron lit up and expressed some profound understandings. When asked about the service-learning

class, he explained that it was a different type of learning. Instead of traditional classroom learning, he described it as mind-expanding. As he offered, “We weren’t just doing numbers...or trying to find adverbs or anything. It was just really an open-minded thing” (Terry, 2003, p. 302).

What Aaron perceived about the community was almost tangible. He began to discern new meaning in the term *community* and to value involvement in the community, both *seeing* the town’s history and taking pride in it. Aaron expressed that he *saw the history of the place*, which, in turn, gave him a different view of the town. His mother expressed that participation in the project made Harwood more real and personal to Aaron who learned that “it’s [the community] not just going to fix itself” (Terry, 2003, p. 303). Aaron, in a philosophical, beyond-his-years manner, stated,

I thought a community would be fine by itself and then after getting into this, it’s like, I didn’t realize how much it really needs....Our history is there. If our monuments aren’t being preserved, they’re just going to eventually rot away, and this is a part of our history. (Terry, p. 303)

According to Aaron, they did not “just learn what’s out there...by just looking to see a building, but to see what it is, what its history is” (Terry, 2001, p. 152). Considering that Aaron was selected as a disconfirming participant in a study, this is quite profound. This very active, gifted adolescent was perceived as not tuning into anything in a classroom; yet he was. Apparently, this seemingly off-task student was very tuned into his service-learning project and his community.

Latoya and Bryan. The Harwood’s Helpers’ service-learning project was experienced differently by the African American students. Latoya recognized that she had experienced the project differently. Recognizing that she was the only African American girl in the class, she stated that at first she didn’t have any friends due to her shyness. After engaging in service-learning, she claimed that she was closer to the students in the class and, as she stated, “I think our experiences are the same now....We’re all pretty, uh, equal now” (Terry, 2003, p. 304). Latoya had been in the gifted program with most of the predominantly White students since third grade. It would seem, however, that she never felt *equal* until her involvement in the Harwood’s Helpers’ service-learning project. Whether it was due to her feeling inadequate or shy, or the existence of prejudice and discrimination in the predominately White classroom culture, it seems that service-learning was instrumental in ameliorating the situation for Latoya, resulting in feelings of equality.

Bryan, also African American, shared a similar experience to Latoya’s—an experience that seemed pivotal in his life as far as establishing deeper relationships with his fellow

Helpers. In his characteristically warm demeanor, he stated, “But, you know, they [Harwood’s Helpers] treated you equal like your brothers and sisters would. That’s why, one of the reasons I like being in the Harwood’s Helpers, cause [*sic*] of the respect you get from the other members” (Terry, 2003, p. 304). Bryan and Latoya were the only students who used the word *equal* during the interviews. They also were the only African American students interviewed.

These African American students indicated that their involvement in the predominantly White community of the downtown area was important. Latoya, who said she had never attended a Christmas parade in the community before her participation in the project, expressed that she enjoyed her participation in the community. She had never been to parades and other community activities before her service-learning experience; in fact, she stated that she always had considered those things boring until she became involved in the Harwood’s Helpers’ project. She stated that she thought it was going to change “the way I want to live when I get to be an adult” (Terry, 2003, p. 304).

Because of her service-learning experience, Latoya wants to live in the city, a place she has never considered living in before, a place mainly occupied by Whites in this rural Georgia town. This raises an important issue about the value of service-learning to communities. Listening to the voices of these young, gifted African Americans begs the question: Could working with others toward a goal in the community help to bridge the chasm that continues to exist between races and ethnicities throughout America and even the world?

DISCUSSION

According to Passow (1989), we enhance our gifted students’ knowledge without helping them to think about the morality of that knowledge. Since gifted children have the potential for greater and more profound social, moral, and ethical abilities, it seems logical that in order to educate them properly, we must offer them opportunities in their educational experience to develop socially, morally, and ethically. Higher levels of service-learning can provide such opportunities. Not only do the students learn during their participation in service-learning, but they also experience serving their communities, making a real difference in the world. By sensitizing gifted and talented youth to be concerned about problems in their communities, might they devote themselves to developing their specialized gifts and talents toward solving the serious problems facing our world (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2003)?

Through service-learning, gifted youth have the opportunity for both moral development and an opportunity to develop a passion for their communities. By having a *passion* for their *communities*, it should follow that youth will

develop *com-passion* themselves (Bohnenberger & Terry, 2002). By sensitizing youth to be concerned about problems in their communities, it is hoped they might better develop their co-cognitive abilities and devote themselves to using their specialized talents toward solving the serious problems facing both their communities and the world (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2003).

When three of the SWaMP Kids, Kat being one, appeared on the *Donahue Show*, Donahue expressed wonderment that a group of teens could prevent the closure of the local landfill. He stated,

Think about this! These are teenagers....Imagine the consciousness now, the awareness at age 14. They'll have it all their lives. These folks are not going to pollute; they're not going to waste. They're going to recycle, and they're going to make a better world, not only for us, but for themselves and their children as well! (cited in Wheeler, 1994)

And isn't that what we as a society need for and from our gifted youth? For them to help bring about a better world for us, for themselves, for their children? Imagine the consciousness. Imagine the world if we could offer our gifted youth experiences so they could develop the skills of problem solving, cooperation, and collaboration; so they could make their community, their world, a better place in which to live. And imagine more gifted youth like Aaron who *see* their community for the first time. Just imagine...

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