In My View
How Character Is Built
by Amitai Etzioni

There has been a long-standing debate about whether or not community service should be required in schools. There are strong moral and educational reasons to favor its inclusion in the curriculum, and powerful pragmatic reasons not to.

In deliberating this question, one should not be concerned by the often repeated statement that to require people to volunteer is an oxymoron, that the worst way to teach students to serve—because they believe such service is morally compelling, something a good citizen or a decent human being does—is to force them to do so. The basic educational fact is that a high proportion of what we do in school is required, including not merely attending school and taking a given mix of subjects but also participating in various practica, for instance lab and character-building activities, especially sports. Consider community service the practicum of classes in civics.

Character Education
I take it for granted that schools are not merely teaching places, but also institutions in which character is built. True character formation ought to be carried out largely in families and in the community; but even when these do their job to perfection, schools are needed to participate in what is a very demanding mission. And given work pressures and changes in structure, families these days often are unable to carry their share of character education. Communities, often thinned out, also are typically otherwise occupied. Hence, schools are even more

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Kappa Delta Pi Record • Winter 2004
important as agents of character education.

By character education I do not mean implanting a given set of values, but developing two behavioral characteristics I consider crucial for forming good people. It is on these characteristics that most any value system can be grafted and without which they are very unlikely to find the required psychological foundations. The behavior characteristics I refer to are, first of all, the ability to control impulse, to defer gratification. The reason this attribute is so important is that even if education is perfect, it cannot extinguish base instincts we have—especially aggressive and sexual ones; hence the needed capacity to control them when they are aroused and to channel the energy to socially constructive activities.

The second characteristic we need is empathy, the ability to walk in another person's shoes, to feel his or her pain and joy. If a person has only strong impulse control, he or she may well be a cold-blooded criminal, aggressive lawyer, boss, or merciless merchant. Empathy serves to ensure that the said control is used for good purpose, not to damage others, and that we shall find a sense of self-affirmation in service to others. Community service is the place in which to develop empathy.

**Experiences that Form Character**

The value of serving others, of volunteerism, of doing things because they are good rather than pay, the fact that service turns us from consumers of the state to participants, to true citizens, all can and have been lectured about and written about in books. These have their place. A good teacher, with whom the students identify, can compel. And a powerful narrative is a major tool of education. However, they pale when it comes to character education, to the lessons impacted by experience.

Sensitized by my own experiences, I have looked at schools shapers that deeply affect those who pass through schools. To provide but one example: We have known since the ancient Greeks that sports form character. They can do so, though, in rather different ways. If sports are practiced so that the main theme is that it matters not if you win or lose but how you play the game, then students will learn to play by the rules, to respect authority, to deal with defeat, to be magnanimous with those who excelled, and much else. If sports are practiced under the banner that winning is not the important thing but the only thing, then students learn to cheat, hide taking performance-enhancing drugs, disrespect referees, and act out when they lose.

All this would lead one, as it surely does me, to strongly favor community service. If carried out properly, students will experience the profound inner satisfaction of serving others rather than self. It brings students in close contact with people of different social backgrounds. Community service (a posture sometimes referred to as "service learning") can teach them not to feel superior to others but learn from them. It is here that students have a chance to practice working together, sharing decisions, learning that adverse conditions are slow to change and require persistent commitments on the side of those out to help. Last but not least, community service is the place we practice the kind of "muscles" that a good citizen requires, as Alexis de Tocqueville long ago pointed out.
Conducive Conditions

The catch is that it is surprisingly difficult to produce conditions under which large-scale community service that educates, that builds character, can take place. This was first driven home to me when I saw school children in Tel Aviv taken to the Negev to admire that a local community was growing vegetables in the middle of the desert by stringing nets over half barrels laid on their backs and filled with water. Though they were initially quite impressed by the project, they soon were bored by gaping at it and spent the day smoking on the sly and playing cards, anxiously awaiting the long trip back.

This lesson was enforced even further when my institute (the Communitarian Network) did a study of volunteerism at a hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. The hospital never felt it could rely on a given number of volunteers showing up, at what time they would appear, and what they would be able and willing to do. Hence, to play it safe, they set aside fairly meaningless tasks for the volunteers, the kind of things that would not be missed if they were not carried out—for instance, making placemats and rearranging flowers. Moreover, the busy hospital administrators oozed a sense that they were wasting their time dealing with the volunteers and hence tried to get them out of their hair as expeditiously as possible. No wonder that soon the volunteers got the feeling they were not needed and not wanted, which undermined their commitments and reinforced the hospital’s sense that they could not be counted on for anything meaningful.

Visiting schools that require a given number of community service hours for graduation, I found a few in which careful planning and much administration.

A Character-Building Lesson

Ben Shemen was more like a British Eton than an American Boys Town. It occupies its own little village. Its ingenious design calls for each child to have close relations with four adults: a homeroom teacher who serves as the main educator; a “house mother” who is in charge of the dormitories but acts as a sort of mother hen; a youth leader with whom kids hang out after hours, during numerous social activities; and a foreman, under whom each child spends two hours a day working in the collective farm. ("Working the earth purifies the soul," was one of Ben Shemen’s many mottos.)

The four adults met regularly, usually unbeknownst to the children, to coordinate their guidance of the youngsters toward what Ben Shemen considered the needed direction. Thus, if a child confronted one of the farm’s foremen, his house mother would know all about it and would draw on the affection the kid had for her to help him to accept the foreman’s authority. And if the child, me in this case, refused to learn the language of the “enemy”—the British who were occupying Palestine—the youth leader would take him for a walk to talk matters out. (In my case it was a young poet, S. Ishar.) When he failed to convince me, the school administration decided, as it often did, that it was better not to coerce me as long as I otherwise kept my nose to the grindstone and behaved.

As a side-effect of the way the school was structured, each child was a member of four different peer groups. One was in classrooms with kids of the same age. A second was in the residential houses with kids of divergent ages (which in my case included an older boy by the name of Shimon Peres). The elder boys were expected to foster the communal mores in the younger ones. The third was in youth groups which met after-hours and were coeducational, as was the fourth group of those who worked on the farm.

Years later, when I became a sociologist, I fully understood the extraordinary power peer groups hold over their members, especially when these groups are successfully mobilized to support the values of the institution in which they are formed. The often used term “peer pressure,” though, seems inappropriate when applied to my life in this boarding school. Ben Shemen’s peer groups did not exert pressure; they filled us with a keen desire to follow the group’s lead. Thus, when other kids were singing patriotic songs at the top of their lungs, I fervently sought to join in, despite the fact that I cannot carry a tune. And when everyone was making their beds without being reminded, I could hardly leave mine rumpled.

My most important Ben Shemen lesson was as lasting as it was painful. My best excuse was
tive preparation did provide an environment that gave the positive experience needed to make a meaningful and sustaining community service. However, in most instances, after a short initial burst of enthusiasm and commitment, the program soon deteriorated into fairly meaningless ways to discharge what more and more students, parents, and teachers considered a requirement that had to be gotten out of the way. Students were allowed to get community service "credits" for doing things they were doing anyhow. For instance, activities that earned credits included participating in a church choir and working after hours in a public library to earn some pocket money; writing a paper about community service; and babysitting for a busy Congress member.

Recommendations
Where do we go from here? Community service should be launched on a small scale, initially drawing merely on volunteers. It requires careful planning—above all working out "sites" in which volunteers would be welcomed and given meaningful assignment and some supervision.

Classes were canceled and a school-wide assembly was called. We were charged with violating communal property for a grossly selfish purpose and with slaughtering a chicken with a dull knife. We were made to stand in front of a sea of our peers and elders, who took turns expressing their outrage. Faces around us could not have been sterner, especially those of the younger children. One eighth grader suggested that we be kicked out summarily. Another favored making us do extra work in the chicken coop for the rest of our stay in Ben Shemen.

I was ready to do most anything to stop the trial, as everybody referred to the assembly: give up a meal each day for the rest of my life; clean the communal toilets (a most despised job) for the balance of the school year; personally ask every remaining chicken for forgiveness.

Those who are assigned to run the program need to be given the time and resources to do the job; it cannot be done effectively, on the run, between other duties. The volunteers need to be regularly debriefed to establish what their experience has been.

The jury of our peers was about to send us packing when the teachers convinced them to merely ground us for the rest of the month. The surprisingly light sentence did little to expunge the terror of a community's palpable dismay. Were it not for the much greater drama that soon followed, I probably would still have "chicken killer!" ringing in my ears.

Aside from making me more mindful of respecting the commonweal (and animal) rights, I was greatly influenced by the event in formulating my thinking about character education. Fashioning experiences, I have argued in communitarian writings, are much more formative than lectures about ethics and textbooks.