

CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

BY HEATHER DAWN SMITH

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The *Cardus Education Survey* in Canada and the United States looked at several issues including “Cultural Engagement.” It found graduates of protestant Christian schools to be less involved in politics and less likely to donate to political causes than their public school peers, but they donate more to churches and other charitable causes and are uniquely outwardly focused, being far more generous with their time by participating in relief and development activities than their peers. Heather Smith provides an example of one school’s intentional, developmental strategy of promoting responsive disciples of Jesus Christ.

The call to raise moral, productive, and engaged citizens has remained a consistent thread in the history of both public and private education. Methods and strategies may have changed, but the mission to educate students to be knowledgeable, responsible, socially skilled, caring, and contributing citizens remains intact. Societies seek to create generations of actively engaged people of influence.

To successfully educate means to prepare our students for new levels of global understanding and interdependence while fostering personal connectedness and increased understanding. Educators fight the rising tide of individualism, apathy, and materialism amongst youth as we seek to instill ethical and thoughtful commitment and a sense of the common good.

Service-Learning (S-L) is one pedagogical tool that is increasingly being used by educators to challenge students to interact meaningfully with the world. S-L calls students to apply their learning while gaining further knowledge in authentic “real life” settings. We take students out of the classroom into authentic life situations where they seek to meet the needs of a people group through service, and are subsequently challenged to grow personally through the acts of serving and reflection. It therefore becomes a reciprocal relationship. Schools all over the world are engaging in S-L both locally and abroad.

With this in mind, an intentional effort has been made to teach students how to serve and to provide opportunities for service and involvement throughout their years at the Mennonite Educational Institute (MEI) in Abbotsford, BC, Canada. Students in preschool through grade 12 are intentionally exposed to, and encouraged to work in, new situations within their own schools and communities as well as those in developing

countries. We first try to intentionally respond to needs around us. For example, in 2010, our campus-wide outreach focused on relief efforts for earthquake-stricken Haiti. Students across the MEI campus raised \$65,000, which was then matched by the Canadian federal government to provide a total of \$130,000 in relief funds.

But we believe that responding also requires interaction—not just sending financial support. The MEI Elementary School (kindergarten through grade 5) is very involved in an ongoing partnership with an orphanage and school complex in Haiti, providing not only ongoing financial support but professional development. In our local area, various elementary classes visit local seniors’ homes, partner with another public local elementary for buddy reading, make quilts for the Salvation Army, serve at the local food bank, pick up garbage in the community, and contribute to Union Gospel Mission.

MEI Middle School (grades 6–8) also has an intentional focus on local and global outreach. Every middle school student participates in an exploratory (elective) rotation called Service, in which students are out in our community weekly, engaging with the poor, elderly, and homeless. They bag groceries for people at the local supermarket, clean cages at the SPCA, provide lunches and play cards at a local homeless shelter, share pictures and stories at a care facility, and assist the Mennonite Central Committee in preparing and shipping relief supplies internationally. The students then raise money to provide a hot catered meal for those with whom they’ve interacted. Our guests attend the student Christmas concert and then join staff and students for lunch. Each person leaves with a gift bag of practical items needed over the winter months. One of our students recently journaled as follows: “I’m so thankful for a school like MEI that has brought me out of my comfort zone, to reach out and serve the

community. I know I have a different perspective for serving and a better understanding of how Jesus wants me to live. To be a good leader is to serve other people."

These weekly opportunities are in addition to individual schoolwide seasonal drives for the local food bank and Christmas Bureau, sending shoeboxes to children around the world through Operation Christmas Child, and working on unique projects such as supporting a particular school in Africa. These special projects occur at all school levels on an ongoing basis throughout the school year. MEI has identified and pursued S-L as a means to provide experiential and meaningful education that elicits the virtues or goodness of students in caring for others. It is the desire of MEI to produce students who live well with and for others.

S-L at MEI culminates when secondary students are invited to participate in the high school missions class and then in our International Service-Learning (IS-L) program in grades 10–12. In this program, teams of eight to ten students serve in another country over their two-week spring break. Our grade 8 middle school partners with the teams, and students annually raise support to fund projects for each of the secondary IS-L destinations (\$10,000–\$20,000 annually), pray for the team they "adopt," purchase supplies for projects, and serve as an encouragement. For some of our students these initial connections birth the dream to one day travel and serve in these countries.

I recently examined the long-term outcomes of our International Service-Learning program by following up on participants who traveled between 1995 and 2005. Five to ten years after their IS-L experience, I found that students described gaining experiences that contributed to self-awareness and self-authorship through an enlarged worldview, a sense of otherness, cognitive changes, and wrestling through the polarities of "big questions/issues" that arise with cultural displacement and through faith development. This growth has since translated to changes in behavior. Many of our students described subsequent involvement in both local and international service, and many continue to serve overseas today (Smith 2010).

Overall, my findings were supported by data from the recent Canadian *Cardus Education Survey* (Pennings, Ray et al. 2012) that suggested that in terms of volunteering, there are "strong positive effects for Christian and religious home-educated graduates compared to government school graduates" (Pennings et al. 2012, 24). The study also found that Protestant Christian school graduates

give more of their time and money to charitable causes than their peers do. The earlier release of Phase 1 (2011) of the report concluded, "Research finds Christian schools to be serving a public good in many ways, regularly countering the argument of social divisiveness and defying the stereotypes about graduates' radical political beliefs and actions" (Pennings et al, 2011, 24).

As Christian educators, we seek to release leaders who are Christ-centered and transformation-minded, and who will obediently answer God's call on their lives.

At MEI, we have come to recognize that learning must extend beyond the classroom. It is not enough to teach the tenets of Christian faith; we must live them together. S-L is one means of "putting feet to our faith" and building habits of lifelong engagement with and sacrifice for others. It is a way to establish Christian worldview and link it to action. One of our IS-L participants concluded, "There is no classroom activity/learning that can be as impacting as a local or global S-L experience. Whether or not students will *understand* the impact during the experience, they will be impacted by the experience." Another stated simply but powerfully, "It changes your life" (Smith 2010, 231).

As we seek to raise a generation of students who are committed to our Lord Jesus Christ and to release leaders who live with awareness and responsiveness to others, we have become convinced that the concept of service is an important construct and a critical educational objective within our education system.

References

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