The Meaning of Volunteer Services in Schools—To the Educator and to the Older Adult

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The Hierarchy of Change

The changes occurring in American education today have implications that reach deep into the relationships and structures of our culture just as these changes are responses to cultural change. The emerging emphasis on humaneness in education is summarized by Dodson (1970):

We stand on the threshold of a new era in human relationships. . . . Today, sociology and anthropology are helping man to consider the other side of the coin. . . . helping man to see that, aside from biological limitations, the forces that relegate people to perceptions of self are the myths and rituals of the social order. . . . New arrangements are being forged, more truly moral relationships are being created within the society. . . . Man must be the builder of new forms of social organization . . . more fulfilling to more people. Here education must play a stellar role. (1)

One major change taking place in education is the increasing use of supportive personnel in schools. Many adults serving in supportive roles are volunteers. Of these volunteers, one-quarter to one-half may be over 50 years old. Havighurst (1969) identifies voluntary service as one of three broad activity categories of people over 50 when they are not working for money or caring for personal and family obligations.

A Mandate of Change

Education has need of mature adult volunteers. Schools represent an opportunity for many older adults to discover active, creative outlets for their time and knowledge by contributing to society and youth.

Perhaps we don’t see clearly enough what it means to live, or realize sharply enough that the last ten to twenty-five percent of life is as important . . . as any other part . . . (Thompson, 1969).
Gerontological literature is full of information on the disengagement theory. Recent research indicates that the correlates of old age, such as failing health, loss of peers, and the "general shrinking of the social world due to factors relating to aging appear to produce the social withdrawal known as disengagement" (Tallmer & Kutner, 1969). It might be worth while to explore some of the factors associated with disengagement in communities where meaningful activity in education is offered to the elderly. It is possible that the very absence of such opportunities for purposeful relationships with people of similar interests and varied ages could influence the symptoms of disengagement. According to Youmans, the factors and conditions leading some older people to disengage from social relationships need investigating (Youmans, 1969).

The Winnetka, Illinois Public Schools, under an Administration on Aging (AOA) research and development grant, made case studies of older adults working with elementary school students. The teachers reported that all five students working with volunteers showed some improvement in self-understanding and self-concept and in relationships with peers and adults. When attendance records of the five children were compared with their records the year before, it was seen that they were absent 22 days more the past year than in the year studied. While at home one day, Mr. Rolfe (one of the volunteers) took a fall. "My first thought . . . was, I hope I won't have to missing seeing Gregg. I should have been worrying about a broken hip . . ." (Herman, 1969).

The volunteers in this study ranged in age from 60 to 77 years old. They had favorable reactions to the experimental program. The volunteers, especially those with no recent experience working with children, were aware of increased openness in their attitudes toward others. The teachers and program coordinator defined educational objectives being sought. Learning, particularly regarding academic motivation in the elementary years, was seen in the context of the child's interests and relationships. Therefore, the prescription for the volunteer's assignment often included comments such as "share your enthusiasm for geology," or "talk to him like a grandchild."

In assessing retiree involvement, the quality of the activity in terms of how meaningful it is should be a measure. The work of volunteers in schools has high meaning for them. They are sharing not only their own particular knowledge and experience, but their work is also carefully coordinated and viewed by school personnel. This is in contrast to other activities frequently planned for and not with the older adult. The activity must be fulfilling if it is to be useful. Buxbaum reports that one elderly lady told him, after a party where the group played guessing games, "We never know how to react. They treat us like children and tell us to act our age." Such activity can be, and often is, damaging to a person's self-respect. Buxbaum further wondered whether some hearing and eyesight losses of the elderly are not an effective way of expressing the individual's need to protect himself from what is said or can be seen in the environment (Buxbaum, 1969).

In recruiting older adults for volunteer educational work from January, 1967 to January, 1969 under the AOA grant, it was noted that the shorter the period between retirement and recruitment was the more frequently was it possible to involve the retiree in the school projects.

An effective school volunteer program had operated in the Winnetka schools for 8 years and always had large numbers of older adults participating. AOA funding was requested initially to discover if communities less privileged than Winnetka could support school volunteer projects. Just as educational needs made a bridge between education and the community imperative, so have the same changes in our social structure made more volunteers available. The retiree often has up to 20 productive years of life remaining after retirement. The second purpose, therefore, was to determine how and to what extent the retiree could be involved in school volunteer work, at both the school and community levels (Freund & Bede, 1968).

During the first grant year projects were established in city and suburban, wealthy, middle, and low income schools and communities in Illinois. In each case a volunteer recruiting service was set up through teaching and demonstration techniques so that when the AOA team withdrew, the programs were self-sustaining. In the second year, communities identified outside of Illinois—Oregon, Washington, Louisiana, New York, and Indiana—were represented. In addition, information was sent to about 250 communities interested in developing school community programs. The training process varied and included literature, films, tapes, lectures, seminars, and inservice programs.

Coordinators were trained to supervise the
volunteers' activities. Each school was encouraged to use a coordinator who could be either a paid employee or a volunteer responsible to the school administration. Many older adults, especially former educators, became excellent coordinators.

The demonstration team worked in communities where school administrations were committed to developing or extending school volunteer programs. For a successful program, three cooperating services had to be established. These included a community service to recruit volunteers, a professional administrative and teaching staff in the school trained to utilize volunteers, and a coordinator to run the program. These three basic program elements varied and were responsive to school needs and community resources.

The Pattern of Change

Some communities already had well established volunteer recruiting services while others had no organized recruiting structure. If no volunteer pool existed, the AOA team worked with the school administrations, school boards, parent-teacher groups, community action groups, professional and fraternal associations, religious organizations, and industry to find individuals who would commit themselves to leadership in organizing the volunteer recruiting service.

The recruiting service was made up of a director, interviewer, and registrar supported by a board representing the various organizations involved. The board member or his associate became the liaison with the parent organization. Thus, recruiting volunteers became a continuous process with the liaison person working with the community's grass roots agencies. One of the more successful forms of recruitment publicity has been the "Volunteer of the Week" caption in neighborhood papers. Successful volunteer projects are graphically described, further needs of the schools identified, and the method of registration given.

For example, in a school where tutors were needed for Spanish-speaking children, a news headline might read "Does Anyone Speak Spanish?" A picture story about a volunteer who worked with a first grader would follow. This might show the volunteer and the child looking at magazine pictures and talking in Spanish and English about them to help the child establish his English vocabulary. At the article's end, the recruiting service address would be given along with other needs, such as a person proficient in knitting or woodcraft, a person knowledgeable in geology, or whatever (Highland Park News, 1967).

The volunteer pools recruit, interview, screen, and match volunteers to requests made by the schools and other non-profit agencies affiliated with the service.

School administrators, special educators, and teachers find school volunteers helpful when they are effectively used. Negative images of volunteering, such as "unreliable" or "do-gooders" are not visible when professionals are trained in the use of volunteers and the work is coordinated by someone responsible to the professionals and who is also concerned with volunteer work satisfaction.

Due to increased longevity, more widespread education, early retirement, and automation, the volunteer pool is growing. New forms of education are required because of the influence of cultural changes, including higher mobility, automation, increasing demands for relevance, and acceleration of available knowledge. Increasingly, educators are combining the process of education with the institutions of the community, encouraging team teaching, and urging individualization of instruction. These processes require human resources to be appropriately identified and guided. They also require re-education of the professional staff. This may be started on an inservice basis, with reference to the volunteer programs. Volunteers coming to the school to teach their specialties need only to be briefed on the mechanics of the assignment, to be given necessary materials, and appreciation for a job well done.

Case Study of Change

The Winnetka, Illinois school volunteer program began in 1959. It was known as the Project for Academic Motivation because the volunteers worked with elementary school students who were identified as academic underachievers.

In 1961, 64 third-grade students were selected as having average or better intelligence but relatively poor classroom performance. Academic enrichment projects with volunteers were designed for a period a week with each of 32 students selected at random from the original 64. The coordinator worked with each volunteer to plan an individualized project for each student. The project was intended to expand on the student's interest, the volunteer's knowledge, and the classroom curriculum. Thus a retired Naval officer might do a geography proj-
ect related to classwork with a student, capitalizing on the student’s interest in foreign stamps or coins. The coordinator reported regularly to the classroom teacher who was able to underscore the interest and achievement of the student’s work with the volunteer. At the end of a school year the experimental group had improved markedly over the control group in attitudes toward learning, library skills, and school attendance.

The Winnetka school volunteer program was funded by the Wieboldt Foundation for the first four years. Subsequently, the Winnetka Schools continued the Project for Academic Motivation, hiring a coordinator to work in each of the then three schools. Currently, the program operates in all five schools in the Winnetka system, coordinated by learning center personnel in each building. Thus, human as well as material resources are centralized in the library resource or learning centers. The project no longer relates exclusively to academic underachievers. Projects may be for enrichment, lectures, remediation, team teaching, individualization of instruction, materials preparation for work with specialists in math, science or other subjects, or deal with demonstrations and work with administrators or boards of education.

Each volunteer is carefully matched to the task for which he is best suited. Many volunteers, particularly the older adult, have a variety of interests or skills accumulated over a lifetime. The carefully identified older volunteer has a perspective that enables him to be especially skillful with youth and he is able to transmit a significant sense of values.

The cost of a school volunteer program varies and may be as little as the cost of the telephone and mailing for the community recruiting service. Typically, a project starts in one school in one community, spreads to the entire school district and then to adjacent communities. By the end of a school semester, one school might utilize from 20 to 50 volunteers. The ramifications of this continuing process are considerable. Communities with such programs reported from 10 to 50% of their volunteers were over age 60 (Freund & Bede, 1969).

We have, through industry, community organizations, and the professionals, a magnificent resource that we could not begin to afford financially to pay for, but which is almost entirely free. School volunteer projects benefit the young and the old and help to bridge the widening gap between them. Berwick effectively states the case in Study of Unplanned Obsolescence:

... It has been my argument that the elderly comprise a neglected cultural resource that the nation ... can ill afford to waste. ... The aged are the repository of traditional human values; their wisdom and experience represent the one possible counterweight to the dehumanizing tendencies in modern times. ... It must seek to establish the vital relevance of aged lives to the highest purposes of society (Berwick, 1969).

The need to foster humaneness in education and to diminish disengagement in the older adult are parallel needs of our culture. A planned course for each parallel need can provide a partnership beneficial to both.

References


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