

“Hobo” Is Not a

Middle school students seemed blind to the homelessness and poverty in their own community. A well-designed service learning unit opened their eyes.

Sarah Hershey and Veronica Reilly

First-time visitors to San Francisco are often struck by the prevalence of homelessness. On a morning walk to work, it's common to pass by people requesting change, pushing shopping carts piled with all their possessions, laying out randomly collected items to sell, or curling up under a blanket atop a tattered piece of cardboard. For many San Franciscans, homeless people are just another piece of the city's fabric. Their high visibility renders them almost invisible.

Although homeless people could be found one block in every direction from the Chinese American International School (a K-8 school serving about 400 students, many from middle- and upper-class backgrounds), our students rarely seemed to notice them. We frequently challenged student comments like, “Why would you give someone change? They're just going to use it to buy drugs,” or “You're dressed like a hobo!”

We were also concerned that so many students complained about having to participate in the school's community-service day. As a language arts teacher and a social studies teacher at the school, we wanted to help our students understand the realities and causes of

homelessness and gain an appreciation for the value of service work. We decided to take a risk: to put aside the “traditional” curriculum for the last six weeks of 7th grade and substitute a service learning unit on homelessness and poverty.

Getting Started

Several elements distinguish *community service learning* from *community service*. The Web site of Learn and Serve (www.servicelearning.org), a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service, explains that

service-learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity change both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content.

To achieve these goals, we implemented the homelessness and poverty unit in a 90-minute daily block combining our 7th grade language arts



and social studies classes. In language arts, students read short stories from the Junior Great Books anthology and analyzed them for details that might indicate the socioeconomic class of major characters, read oral histories of homeless Americans from Steven Vanderstaay's book *Street Lives*, and participated in minilessons on relevant skills in grammar and writing research papers. In social studies, they examined social, political, and economic factors that contribute to poverty, analyzed the concept of “class,” and received minilessons on citations and bibliographies. We brought all 40 students together for

Respectful Word



made bad choices, and so on. We displayed the posters throughout the school, and the following year we were delighted to discover that many students remembered seeing them as 6th graders and even recalled some of the myths and facts.

A week into the unit, we divided the students into small groups to choose research topics from a list of topics related to homelessness and poverty;

homeless and poor people?

■ Do states with a lower minimum wage have more homeless people than other states? Why or why not?

Experiential Learning

The unit included two major field trips. Students first visited the San Francisco Food Bank, where they learned about hunger in the city and packed thousands of pounds of food for distribution. The

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these topics included mental illness, domestic violence, physical disabilities, housing, youth/families, health care, veterans, Hurricane Katrina, employment/minimum wage, the paths out of homelessness, societal attitudes and media portrayal, and global connections. Individual students then developed their own more specific research questions, such as,

- How accurate are the media's portrayals of homelessness?
- When do homeless victims of domestic violence seek help, and if they don't, why not?
- How has the Iraq war spurred veteran homelessness? Is there a significant difference between veterans returning from Iraq and from Vietnam?
- How does the health care system in the United States compare to those of other countries in terms of the effectiveness of services provided for

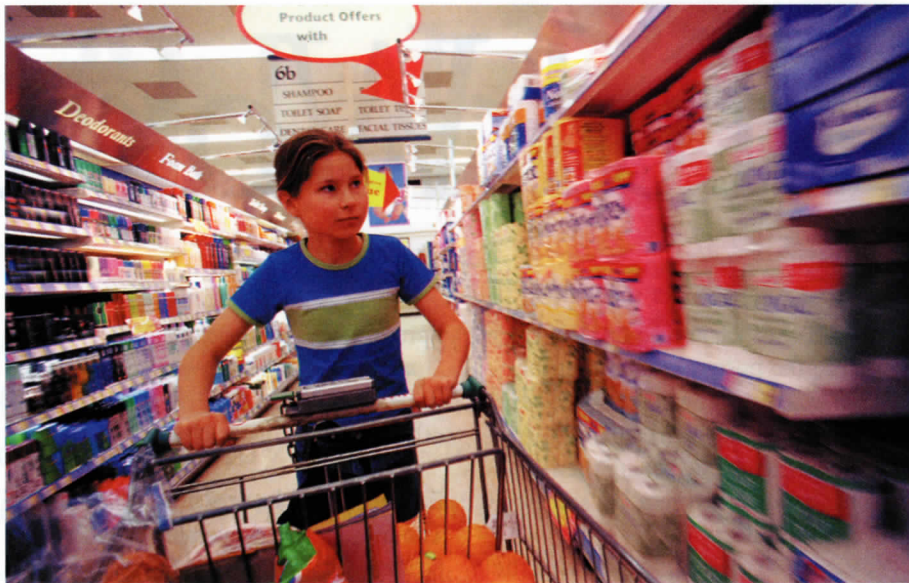
such activities as the unit launch, introduction of research and oral presentation projects, speakers, field trips, culminating reflections, and planning an ongoing 8th grade service project.

We designed a pretest that incorporated national and local statistics about homelessness and poverty. The pretest countered stereotypes and piqued students' interest, and it also provided a basis for their first small-group project, "Myth vs. Fact" posters. Each poster challenged a stereotypical belief: All homeless people are drug users, homeless people don't have jobs, the only reason people are homeless is that they

experience was so powerful in building community among the students and in developing a sense of making a real difference that one class elected to return to the food bank four times during 8th grade. With each visit, they set and met a goal of surpassing their previous food-packing totals.

The second field trip was to a place familiar to the students: the supermarket. During the week before the trip, the students kept a record of the food they ate. On the day of the trip, they were assigned a hypothetical family of four, told that family's income and expenses, and asked to buy enough food for a week's worth of meals. Both hypothetical parents had full-time, minimum-wage jobs with full health benefits, excluding dental care. However, after deducting the costs of health insurance premiums, dental cleanings, braces, rent, car insurance, gas, taxes, utilities,

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clothes, and miscellaneous expenses, the family was left with only a small amount of money for food.

What students recorded in their ongoing unit reflection journals revealed that this exercise produced deep learning. Although some of our students came from families that experienced tight budgets similar to the hypothetical family, most lived in middle- and upper-class homes.

Students in the latter groups developed genuine empathy: “That was so stressful! It must really take a toll on parents who have to do that every week,” or “I never realized how much food costs! I usually just go to the supermarket with my mom and throw stuff in the cart. I’ll never think about the supermarket in the same way again.” All the students learned about nutrition, how diet affects short- and long-term health outcomes, and the complicating factor of lack of access to affordable health care.

Conducting In-Depth Research

We invited three speakers: Jason Albertson, a clinical psychiatric social worker for the San Francisco Department of Public Health’s Homeless Outreach Team; Clifford Sarkin, a Children’s Defense Fund lawyer whose work focuses on expanding health care access

for children in California; and Lisa “Tiny” Gray-Garcia, a poverty scholar, author of *Criminal of Poverty: Growing up Homeless in America*, and cofounder of *POOR Magazine/PoorNewsNetwork*. Collectively, the speakers gave students a deeper understanding of what it means to be homeless, what services are available to poor and homeless people, and how they can help end homelessness and poverty.

In tandem with field trips and speakers, students began to research their topics. We started them off with packets of information, including articles we gathered and materials from the National Coalition for the Homeless Web site (www.nationalhomeless.org). We also provided an annotated list of Web resources. Students researched their topics during class time, which enabled us to give them one-on-one guidance. The small-group setup facilitated student-to-student sharing; students often came across information that was not directly relevant to their own research question but that proved useful to a member of their group who was researching a different aspect of the same topic.

Because we allowed students to choose their general topic and specific research question, they were able to pursue

subjects that were meaningful to them as well as relevant to the unit. Many students who were previously unengaged in class writing projects became engaged in this research.

One student who was researching how people qualify for government-funded health insurance printed out pages and pages of Medicare regulations, read them carefully, and asked us such specific, targeted questions that we had to recruit a lawyer familiar with health policy to help answer them. Previously, this capable student had done the minimum for many projects. Another student who normally struggled tremendously to get simple assignments done on time chose to research the major factors contributing to youth homelessness; this student spent hours poring over personal accounts of how different youth became homeless.

The research culminated in an individual research paper as well as an oral presentation by each small group. This allowed for a balanced combination of personal responsibility and group cooperation.

Publicly Sharing the Learning

After all their hard work, many students were eager to share what they had learned with others. The audience for the oral presentations included not only other students but also families, school administrators, and other interested community members. We encouraged students to be creative, to use at least one visual aid, and to have each group member speak for an approximately equal amount of time. Before the day of the presentation, each group gave a dress rehearsal to their own class to get teacher and peer feedback. This helped them troubleshoot and build confidence before their public performance.

Finally, on the appointed day, we gathered together. Students used PowerPoint, handmade posters, skits, movie clips, and quizzes to bring their presentations to life. Each group’s presentation was about 10 minutes long and was

followed by questions from the audience. This was sometimes the most difficult part of the presentation, but again and again students rose to the challenge. It was satisfying to see the pride and relief on students' faces when they stepped off the stage, because, almost invariably, they had performed incredibly well.

One group compared and contrasted clips from the South Park episode "Night of the Living Homeless" and the movie *The Pursuit of Happyness* as part of their media analysis. They also presented results from a survey they had created to

project, students chose to return to the San Francisco Food Bank multiple times to volunteer. Last year, students decided to follow the whole process of distributing food to hungry people in San Francisco: They made one return trip to the food bank in the fall, and they also planned to volunteer at a garden that grows food for the food bank and at a soup kitchen where food is distributed from the food bank in the spring.

Because we had the same students in both language arts and social studies for two consecutive years, we implemented the action project in the students' 8th

into deep understanding and compassion. At first, some people were skeptical, fearing that the students would not acquire necessary academic skills through this unit. They soon saw, however, that students benefited academically from the critical thinking, academic rigor, student-centered instruction, and project-based learning that were at the unit's core.

Perhaps even more important, the project has had a lasting effect on many of our students. Several school alumnae who participated have told us that they continue to be involved with community service. Many students talk about an ongoing, increased awareness and concern about homelessness and poverty in their community and in the world. Some have said they now make sure to acknowledge people begging on the street (even if they don't give money); others have organized their families to give away unneeded clothing to homeless people living near their homes. One student even resurrected her religious community's food drive, which had virtually come to a halt.

The project has also had lasting effects on us as teachers. Like many people, we entered education because we wanted to make a difference in others' lives. There is no greater joy than seeing our students want to make a difference, too. We learned from our students and their research projects and were inspired again and again by their enthusiasm. To be sure, taking curriculum in new, uncharted directions involves challenge and risk—but this experience has reinforced our belief that some risks are worth taking. **EL**

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assess the 6th–8th grade students' perspectives on homelessness. In observing that the 6th graders' views were overwhelmingly more negative and stereotypical than that of the 7th and 8th graders who had completed the homelessness and poverty unit, one group member concluded that the curriculum was responsible for the difference.

Taking Action

The research papers and oral presentations served as a springboard for the next step: action. Our school had traditionally made community service a graduation requirement, but the type of service was not specified or integrated into the curriculum. One of our major goals in this project was to transform the community-service requirement into thoughtful, engaged community service learning.

After the presentations, we sat down with both classes and discussed what action they wanted to take in response to their research. Through brainstorming and discussion, we narrowed our options down to a handful of possibilities and voted on a final action project.

During the first two years of the

grade year, following the research project year. (Schools where this is not the case could simply conduct the research project earlier in the year, leaving time to carry out the action project during the same year.)

The difference between student attitudes toward community-service activities before and after the unit was amazing. Previously, many students complained that their school community service was "child labor" and had "no point." Since launching this curriculum, students eagerly inquire about when we will be starting our planned action project, and they are dedicated and enthusiastic while working on it. The complaints about community service have disappeared.

Lasting Benefits

We initiated the homelessness and poverty unit in 2005 and have repeated it every year. Although only one of us is still working at the school, the curriculum persists. The short-term effects of the unit have been significant. Every year, we have seen students' attitudes and knowledge transform. Stereotypes and misinformation have changed

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