INTEGRATING A STRUCTURED ETHICAL REFLECTION CURRICULUM INTO HIGH SCHOOL COMMUNITY SERVICE EXPERIENCES: IMPACT ON STUDENTS' SOCIOMORAL DEVELOPMENT

James S. Leming

ABSTRACT

It is widely accepted within the field of community service that reflection is an important factor in promoting personal and sociomoral development. The purpose of this research was to determine if a particular form of reflection—decision making with an emphasis on the ethical nature of community service—has special value in achieving service-learning goals. Three dimensions of adolescent identity development served as dependent variables: agency, social relatedness, and moral-political awareness. Four hundred seventy-six high school students were assessed on the dependent variables before and after experiencing one of three conditions: community service with an ethical reasoning component; community service with reflection, but without an ethical reasoning component; and no community service (control). After one semester, it was found that students in the first condition (ethical decision making curriculum integrated into the community service program) made greater advances on all three dimensions of identity formation when compared with students in the other two conditions. Specifically, it was found that they became more systematic in their ethical reasoning and more likely to consider situations and issues from an ethical point of view.

It is widely accepted among educators and researchers involved with community service programs that reflection is an important factor in promoting students' personal and sociomoral development (Billig, 2000; Waterman, 1997). The standard interpretation of the benefits of reflection is that academic goals are promoted through the acts of oral and written reflection, and that personal development is enhanced by drawing students' attention to the types of personal changes taking place and linking actions and effects. However, if the fields of community service and service-learning are to develop a body of "best practice" knowledge, the relationship between theory, research, and practice

This study was supported by a grant from the W. W. Kellogg Foundation to the Institute for Global Ethics.

Reprint requests to James S. Leming, Carl A. Gerstacker Chair in Education, Saginaw Valley State University, 7400 Bay Road, University Center, Michigan 48710. Electronic mail may be sent to leming@svsu.edu.

ADOLESCENCE, Vol. 36, No. 141, Spring 2001
Libra Publishers, Inc., 3089C Clairemont Dr., PMB 383, San Diego, CA 92117

must be strengthened. One topic in need of attention is a more precise specification of varieties of student reflection within community service settings, and the relationship between the characteristics and quality of such reflection and students' personal and sociomoral development.

A useful and insightful theoretical perspective on how community service experiences promote personal and sociomoral development has been presented by Youniss and Yates (Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Building on the work of Erikson (1968), they suggest that adolescents struggle to understand themselves in relation to society. In the process of searching for an identity, adolescents attempt to identify with values and ideologies that transcend the immediate concerns of self and instead have historical continuity. Community service offers an opportunity for adolescents to form an identity with links to mature social membership.

According to Yates and Youniss, three developmental concepts are relevant for an understanding of adolescents' identity formation in community service settings. First is agency, which refers to personal directedness and self-understanding, personal competence and responsibility, and self-esteem. Second is social relatedness, which refers to the potential to fulfill adult roles responsibly and effectively. It includes a sense of the importance of community relationships and affiliations. Third is moral-political awareness, which refers to moral sensibilities and the propensity for civic connectedness and involvement. These are three important dimensions of adolescent identity development.

Youniss and Yates (1997) accord a critical role to reflection in the process of identity formation within the context of community service. They state that "when participation is encouraged by respected adults, youth begin to reflect on the political-moral ideologies used to understand society. It is this process of reflection, which takes place publicly with peers and adults, as well as privately, that allows youth to construct identities that are integrated with ideological stances and political-moral outlooks" (p. 36).

The present study examined the effects of integrating an ethical decision making process into a high school community service program. Two research questions guided the investigation: (1) Would students' ethical sensibilities and ability to make ethically grounded decisions be advanced by using the ethical decision making framework of the Building Decision Skills curriculum of the Institute for Global Ethics (Born & Mirk, 1997)? (2) Is there a "value added" effect on students' identity formation (personal and sociomoral development) as a result of integrating ethical decision making activities into a community service program?

Research Design

A nonequivalent pretest and posttest with control group research design was utilized. The research questions required that students be assessed on the dependent variables before and after experiencing one of three conditions: a community service program with a structured ethical reasoning component (SLE), a community service program that incorporated limited reflection but did not have an explicit ethical reasoning component (SLO), and no community service program—control (CON). Due to the voluntary nature of the teachers' participation in this study, it was not possible to control for preexisting differences between groups. However, the potential impact of initial differences between groups was controlled by adjusting posttest scores for significant pretest differences utilizing analysis of covariance procedures.

Sample

The sample was drawn from a large school district located in the southwestern suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri. The school district draws most of its students from nearby middle-class communities that are preponderantly white. Almost all of the students in this sample could be described as college prep, but not academic stars. The sample consisted of 75% females and 25% males. The SLE condition was a senior elective in community service located at a high school with 2,100 students. The SLO condition was the same senior community service elective located at three other high schools in the district. The CON condition was senior English literature classes at the SLE school. The curriculum was implemented for three consecutive semesters: spring 1997, fall 1997, and spring 1998. All students participating in the study were matched on pretests and posttests. This matching resulted in 110 SLE students, 193 SLO students, and 173 CON students for subsequent statistical analysis. The students matched on pretests and posttests represented 89% of all students who completed at least one of the two tests.

Treatment

The Building Decision Skills (BDS) curriculum (Born & Mirk, 1997), the structured ethical reflection that was integrated into the community service program, consists of ten lessons designed to help middle school and high school students develop an awareness of the need for sound ethics and to teach them a method of reasoning about ethical dilemmas. After activities designed to define the shared (core) values

of the students and their community, the curriculum shifts students' focus from reasoning about right-versus-wrong dilemmas to reasoning about right-versus-right situations. It is the latter focus that is at the heart of the curriculum. Four right-versus-right decision paradigms are presented and students participate in identifying how these conflicts play out in ethical dilemmas: truth versus loyalty, self versus community, short term versus long term, and justice versus mercy. Once students are able to utilize the decision paradigms to analyze ethical dilemmas, three decision principles are presented: ends-based thinking (utilitarianism), rule-based thinking (Kant's categorical imperative), and care-based thinking (Golden Rule). Students then practice the curriculum's decision-making techniques by applying them to hypothetical dilemmas, as well as real-world dilemmas that the students or teacher might broach in class.

The nature of the community service experiences varied somewhat between classes, although the basic structure was similar in both the SLE and SLO classrooms. The first few weeks of each semester were spent going over ground rules and setting up the community service activities. It was during this time that the foundational lessons of the ethics curriculum were presented.

The students planned their own community service activities. A typical week consisted of two days off campus in settings that involved working with children or adults, and two days working in school or in the community on projects designed to benefit others, but not requiring face-to-face contact. Friday was spent debriefing and reflecting on the week's projects and preparing for next week's activities. The following were typical projects that involved working with others: providing companionship for residents of a retirement home, being paired (as tutors or buddies) with elementary school students in need of assistance, working in a soup kitchen, working with autistic children, serving dinner at the Ronald McDonald House, and helping with the Special Olympics. The first two projects were the most common. The following were typical projects designed to help others but did not require face-to-face contact: running a recycling program in the school, helping with the United Way program, conducting a canned food drive, improving the physical appearance of the high school football stadium, collecting money to help the needy pay electric bills, running an anti-drinking and driving program in school, landscaping a city park, and taking responsibility for an Adopt-a-Highway project. SLE and SLO teachers kept weekly logs documenting the time spent in, and the nature of, reflection activities.

In the SLE classes it was found that students saw little in their community service experience that was ethically problematic. As a result, much of the ethical decision making component focused on per-

sonal and social ethical issues faced by adolescents. While both sets of teachers spent an equivalent amount of time on reflection, ethical issues predominated in the SLE classes while the reflection in the SLO classes tended to focus more on practical planning issues.

Instrumentation

A student-completed paper-and-pencil questionnaire was developed to assess outcomes. The outcomes were the three previously noted dimensions of identity formation (personal and sociomoral development): personal agency, social relatedness, and moral-political awareness. The questionnaire contained some items and scales from related studies. Additionally, a new set of questions (and scoring key) was developed based on three community service scenarios/dilemmas to assess students' awareness of the ethical dimension in community service situations, their disposition to accept ethical responsibility for such situations, and their ability to make ethically based decisions utilizing the Building Decision Skills framework. Data from a pilot study were used to refine these questions.

First, students' written responses to three ethical scenarios/dilemmas were used to determine if a community service program that includes an ethical reflection component has an effect on general ethical agency. Each of the situations contained a right-versus-right conflict. In the first scenario/dilemma, a student sees a fellow student stealing property from a community service site. In the second scenario/dilemma, a student must decide whether to continue tutoring a young student who is attached to and dependent on him or take an after-school job. In the third scenario/dilemma, students must decide how to handle the discovery that some homes are the source of pollution at a local pond.

The scoring protocol assessed the extent to which students demonstrated sensitivity to the ethical nature of the scenarios/dilemmas, the extent to which they accepted responsibility for addressing the situation, and the extent to which they analyzed the situation in a structured and deliberative manner. Specifically, students' responses were scored on three indices. The Ethical Awareness Index indicates the extent to which the respondent recognizes that there is an ethical dimension to the three situations. The Acceptance of Ethical Responsibility Index focuses on who retains responsibility for the final decision (self or others), and how directly the respondent takes responsibility for resolving the problem. The Issue Perspective Index determines the extent to which the respondent frames the issue within the language and structure of the BDS curriculum (i.e., truth versus loyalty, justice versus mercy, self versus community, short term versus long term).

Responses are rated as high (3), medium (2), or low (1).

Three doctoral students and the principal investigator selected 100 questionnaires at random and scored them independently. Interrater reliability was achieved with an exact match in 85% of the assigned scores.

An additional aspect of ethical agency, sense of self-confidence in social settings, was assessed. The Janis-Field Feelings of Inadequacy Scale (see Robinson & Shaver, 1973) was used to determine whether students' sense of self-esteem in social settings increased following a community service program with an ethical reflection component. This scale differs from more typical self-concept measures in that its focus is on self-esteem in actual social settings. It has been used extensively in research, and has achieved wide acceptance. Scores can range from 10 to 50.

Second, this study examined whether a community service program that includes an ethical reflection component has an effect on students' sense of social relatedness. Two scales, originally developed by Newmann and Rutter (1983), were utilized to assess sense of social responsibility and concern for the welfare of others within school and in society at large. Seven items measure general sense of social responsibility, with possible scores ranging from 7 to 35. Three items measure sense of responsibility within school, and possible scores range from 3 to 15. Both scales utilize a Likert response format.

In addition, a modified version of the Rokeach Survey of Values (Rokeach, 1973) was used to assess whether students' preference for basic social values had changed in a more socially responsible direction. Students ranked twelve values: compassion, responsibility, wealth, independence, honesty, recognition, respect, influence, pleasure, community, fairness, and intimacy.

Third, development of moral-political awareness was assessed using an adapted version of a scale developed by Newmann and Rutter (1983). The scale measured the degree to which the students felt disposed toward greater community involvement. Questions dealt with students' anticipated future participation in community affairs. Students' scores on the Ethical Awareness Index and the Acceptance of Ethical Responsibility Index were also utilized to assess this variable.

RESULTS

One-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), with pretest scores as covariants, were used when tests for homogeneity of variance dictated that ANCOVA was warranted. When analysis of variance indicated a statistically significant difference among the three groups, Scheffé post

hoc procedures were utilized to test individual pairwise differences for statistical significance. The number of students utilized for statistical analysis sometimes varied from item to item due to the failure of some students to answer both the prestest and postest questions. This was most apparent for the items pertaining to rank order of values.

To test for changes in students' agency, two sources of data were utilized. First, scores on the ethical orientation indices (Ethical Awareness, Acceptance of Ethical Responsibility, and Issue Perspective) were analyzed. The results are shown in Table 1.

For the first scenario/dilemma, SLE students demonstrated significantly higher ethical capacities than did both the SLO and CON students on all three ethical orientation indices. That is, SLE students were more aware that an ethical issue was involved in the situation, more likely to accept responsibility for resolving the ethical conflict, and more likely to frame their analysis of the situation in the language of the BDS curriculum than were either the SLO or CON students. For the second scenario/dilemma, SLE students demonstrated significantly higher ethical reasoning capacities than did SLO and CON students on all three ethical orientation indices except one; SLE students were not more likely to accept responsibility for resolving the ethical conflict than were SLO students. In addition, SLO students were more likely to accept responsibility for resolving the ethical conflict than were CON students. For the third scenario/dilemma, SLE students scored significantly higher than did SLO and CON students on the Ethical Awareness Index and the Issue Perspective Index. SLE students also scored significantly higher than did CON students, but not SLO students, on the Acceptance of Ethical Responsibility Index.

The second dimension of agency investigated was sense of confidence in social settings. Analysis of covariance on Janis-Field Feelings of Inadequacy Scale posttest scores, with pretest scores as the covariant, revealed no statistically significant difference among the three groups in level of self-esteem (see Table 2).

Data from two instruments were used to assess changes in the second area of identity development—students' social relatedness. First, two scales from an instrument developed by Newmann and Rutter (1983) were utilized—sense of social responsibility in general and within school. The results of analyses of covariance are reported in Table 3.

Both the SLE and SLO students demonstrated a higher posttest sense of responsibility within their school than did the CON students. There was no statistically significant difference among the three groups in terms of sense of general social responsibility.

Table 1

Analysis of Covariance with Posttest Least Square Means, Standard Errors (in Parentheses), and Cell Sizes for Ethical Awareness, Acceptance of Ethical Responsibility, and Issue Perspective (Scenarios/Dilemmas 1 – 3)

Group/Variable	SLE n=110	SLO n=193	CON n=173	F Ratio	p Value	Scheffé Test
Awareness - 1	2.518 (.062)	2.097 (.047)	2.091 (.059)	17.123	<.001	SLE>SLO p<.001 SLE>CON p<.001
Acceptance - 1	2.388 (.075)	2.159 (.053)	2.150 (.067)	3.602	.028	SLE>SLO p=.048 SLE>CON p=.065
Perspective - 1	2.166 (.054)	1.340 (.041)	1.412 (.050)	81.481	<.001	SLE>SLO p<.001 SLE>CON p<.001
Awareness - 2	2.132 (.064)	1.908 (.048)	1.754 (.060)	9.395	<.001	SLE>SLO p=.021 SLE>CON p<.001
Acceptance - 2	1.886 (.060)	1.931 (.045)	1.647 (.057)	8.026	<.001	SLE>CON p=.016 SLO>CON p=.001
Perspective - 2	1.642 (.048)	1.300 (.036)	1.332 (.045)	17.471	<.001	SLE>SLO p<.001 SLE>CON p<.001
Awareness - 3	2.103 (.057)	1.878 (.043)	1.717 (.054)	12.142	<.001	SLE>SLO p=.008 SLE>CON p<.001
Acceptance - 3	2.380 (.069)	2.255 (.052)	2.107 (.065)	4.198	.016	SLE>CON p=.016
Perspective - 3	1.708 (.051)	1.158 (.039)	1.185 (.049)	41.161	<.001	SLE>SLO p<.001 SLE>CON p<.001

Table 2

Analysis of Covariance with Posttest Least Square Means, Standard Errors (in Parentheses), and Cell Sizes for Self-Esteem

Group/Variable	SLE n=109	SLO n=193	CON n=170	F Ratio	p Value
Self-Esteem	35.033 (.366)	35.367 (.287)	34.570 (.343)	1.586	.206

Table 3

Analysis of Covariance with Posttest Least Square Means, Standard Errors (in Parentheses), and Cell Sizes for Sense of Responsibility

Group/Variable	SLE n=110	SLO n=193	CON n=172	F Ratio	p Value	Scheffé Test
Sense of Soc. Resp. (General)	26.517 (.544)	26.160 (.429)	26.159 (.511)	.158	.854	
Sense of Soc. Resp. (School)	10.890 (.180)	10.476 (.143)	9.699 (.172)	11.755	<.001	SLE>CON p<.001 SLO>CON p=.003

The second measure of social relatedness was the Rokeach Survey of Values, which required students to rank order twelve values. Posttest scores were adjusted for differences in pretest scores. Table 4 presents the results of the posttest statistical analysis.

SLE students ranked three values significantly higher in importance (i.e., lower scores) than did CON students: honesty, community, and responsibility. SLO students did not rank these three values significantly higher in importance than did CON students. Additionally, SLE students ranked wealth as significantly lower in importance than did CON students. Finally, SLE students ranked pleasure significantly lower and responsibility significantly higher in importance than did SLO students.

Table 4

Analysis of Covariance with Posttest Least Square Means, Standard Errors (in Parentheses), and Cell Sizes for Rank Order of Values

Group/Variable	SLE n=106	SLO n=166	CON n=120	F Ratio	p Value	Scheffé Test
Honesty	2.929 (.249)	3.503 (.198)	4.000 (.234)	4.909	.008	SLE<CON p=.008
Respect	3.454 (.222)	3.248 (.177)	4.014 (.209)	4.017	.019	SLO<CON p=.020
Responsibility	3.464 (.222)	4.181 (.178)	4.132 (.210)	3.594	.028	SLE<SLO p=.043 SLE<CON p=.094
Compassion	5.539 (.266)	5.746 (.212)	5.875 (.250)	.429	.651	
Independence	6.240 (.285)	6.297 (.227)	5.638 (.267)	1.978	.140	
Intimacy	6.791 (.269)	6.672 (.215)	6.380 (.252)	.685	.505	
Pleasure	6.893 (.255)	5.866 (.205)	6.168 (.240)	4.807	.009	SLE>SLO p=.009
Fairness	7.191 (.256)	7.673 (.204)	7.352 (.240)	1.189	.305	
Influence	8.177 (.262)	7.945 (.210)	7.895 (.247)	.351	.704	
Community	8.730 (.206)	8.944 (.165)	9.466 (.195)	3.662	.027	SLE<CON p=.036
Wealth	9.072 (.265)	8.693 (.212)	8.175 (.249)	3.113	.046	SLE>CON p=.049
Recognition	9.350 (.236)	9.133 (.190)	8.800 (.224)	1.464	.233	

Note. Lower scores indicate that the students considered the value of greater importance.

To assess the third dimension of identity formation, moral-political awareness, posttest data from a scale designed to measure students' anticipated future participation in community affairs were utilized. The results are presented in Table 5. Both SLE and SLO students anticipated being more involved in their communities in the future than did CON students.

Additionally, students' moral-political awareness was assessed using students' scores on the Ethical Awareness Index and the Acceptance of Ethical Responsibility Index. SLE students were found to be more sensitive to, or aware of, the ethical dimension of each scenario/dilemma than were either SLO or CON students. With regard to the acceptance of ethical responsibility, SLE students demonstrated a higher sense of ethical responsibility than did SLO students on one scenario/dilemma, and CON students on all three. SLO students demonstrated a higher sense of ethical responsibility than did CON students on one scenario/dilemma.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that the integration of a structured approach to ethical decision making into students' community service experiences is beneficial for their identity formation (they were compared with students who had community service experiences that lacked an expressed ethical focus in the reflection component of the program, as well as students with no community service experiences). Consistent with prior research, for both community service programs (standard reflection and ethics-focused reflection), significant increases

Table 5

Analysis of Covariance with Posttest Least Square Means, Standard Errors (in Parentheses), and Cell Sizes for Anticipated Future Community Participation

Group/Variable	SLE n=108	SLO n=193	CON n=170	F Ratio	p Value	Scheffé Test
Future Community Participation	16.186 (.226)	16.327 (.178)	15.519 (.212)	4.515	.012	SLE>CON p=.10 SLO>CON p=.015

were found in students' sense of social responsibility within school and in their anticipated future participation in community affairs. Neither group, however, demonstrated significant increases in their general sense of social responsibility or self-esteem.

Among students with community service experiences, those who participated in a structured ethical decision making program (SLE) often differed from those who participated in a program that did not have an ethical reasoning component (SLO). In terms of the agency dimension of identity formation, SLE students demonstrated significantly higher ethical capacities (awareness, issue framing and, to a lesser extent, acceptance of responsibility) than did SLO students. However, SLE students were not different from SLO students in sense of confidence in social settings (self-esteem). With regard to the social relatedness dimension of identity formation, it was found that SLE students attached less importance to pleasure, a value that focused on self, and more importance to responsibility, an other-focused value, than did SLO students. Finally, regarding the moral-political awareness dimension of identity formation, it was found that SLE students possessed higher ethical awareness than did SLO students, but the two groups were not different in anticipated future involvement in community service. In short, students who were exposed to a structured ethical decision making curriculum within a community service program developed increased awareness of, and greater ability to reason systematically about, ethical issues.

According to Erikson (1968), adolescents struggle to understand themselves in relation to society. They attempt to identify with values and ideologies that transcend the immediate concerns of family and self and connect them with the traditions of their communities. One goal of community service programs has been to provide an environment in which youth can make these connections and successfully resolve the important identity issues of this stage of development. The findings of the present research indicate that an ethical decision making component in community service programs may promote moral growth in ways that might not occur without an explicit and structured focus on ethical reflection. With this added component, the effects of community service experiences, in regard to both adolescent identity formation (sociomoral development) and their capacity for systematic ethical reasoning, may be enhanced.

REFERENCES

Billig, S. H. (2000). Research on K-12 school-based service-learning: The evidence builds. *Phi Delta Kappan, 81*(9), 658–664.

Born, P., & Mirk, P. (1997). *Building decision skills (2nd ed.).* Camden, ME: Institute for Global Ethics.

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis.* New York: W. W. Norton.

Newmann, F. M., & Rutter, R. A. (1983). *The effects of high school community service programs on students' social development.* Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Robinson, J. P., & Shaver, P. R. (1973). *Measures of social psychological attitudes.* Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.

Rokeach, M. (1973). *The nature of human values.* New York: Free Press.

Waterman, A. S. (1997). An overview of service-learning and the role of research and evaluation in service-learning programs. In A. S. Waterman (Ed.), *Service-learning: Applications from the research* (pp. 1–11). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Yates, M., & Youniss, M. (1996). A developmental perspective on community service in adolescence. *Social Development, 5*(1), 85–111.

Youniss, J., & Yates, M. (1997). *Community service and social responsibility.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.