A Child Friendly Perspective on Community Service and Learning: The Story of the *Knick Knack Nook*

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This article is a review of the following book and a description and rationale of an alternative perspective to community service and learning. *A Practical Guide to Service Learning: Strategies for Positive Development in Schools.* Felicia Wilczenski and Susan M. Coomey (2007). New York: Springer Science & Business; 171 pages.

Geared toward school psychologists and counselors, this book provides the rationale, theory and methods to assist students in service learning activities. It focuses on how service learning can aid in their social, emotional, career and academic development. Of particular strength is the emphasis on connecting community service to the reflective exercises that school personnel can do to ensure student development and wellbeing. Providing a format that is easy to follow, Wilczenski and Coomey present descriptions of the supports that facilitate service learning, participatory methods, ethical and logistical considerations and how to evaluate the process and outcome. Special emphasis is placed on supporting mental health and students with special needs such as physical, cognitive and sensory disabilities, gifted students and those with social, emotional and behavioral impairments. Further, the benefits of service learning for reducing health and sexual risk-taking, dropping out of school and school violence are identified.

It is likely that busy school personnel will most appreciate the blueprints provided at the end of the book. Using a strengths-based developmental assets approach, programs for conducting environmental sustainability projects that can be tied to the curriculum are provided for a wide range of grades and students with differing abilities. The tasks, essential questions to pose for reflection and potential benefits to the student and community are understandable and easy to follow. All in all, the book provides a comprehensive guide for adult-led community service learning.

The following example provides an alternative perspective on community service learning. Similar to the book's blueprint examples, this project is also focused on re-cycling but describes a more youth-led initiative. Instead of looking at how adults can help students who help their communities, this project describes how students can help both adults and their communities.

The Story of the *Knick Knack Nook:* An Example of a Community Service and Learning Project with Students in Grades 4-9.

The author was asked to be the volunteer community service learning coordinator for her son's school, an independent middle school for grades 6-9. The community service learning component is part of the school's International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme, whose focus is to help students participate actively and responsibly in a changing and increasingly interrelated world. This school is one of three schools on a small island in British Columbia, Canada—twenty minutes from the mainland and accessible by a ferry. This semi-isolated island has the largest population of children under five years per capita adult in BC according to the 2001 Canadian Census, 3500 permanent residents and is surrounded by forest and ocean. About 500 workers and over 200 students commute to offices and high schools on the mainland each day. There are 65 km of hiking/walking trails, shops, four churches, a thriving arts community and a parks and recreational program that runs mainly out of the community public school.

Concurrently, a zero waste initiative intended to enhance environmental sustainability was gaining support within the community. One missing component of this initiative was the lack of a re-use-it store on the island, resulting in residents either ferrying used goods off island, throwing them out, or giving them away. The author and coordinator of the zero waste initiative thought that the development and running of a re-use-it store would be a great project for youth's community service and learning, while at the same time providing a needed resource for the island. The first stage in this project was to mobilize students and interested community members through a visioning meeting, in order to determine what this place would look like, how it would be run and what the store would be called. The condition for involvement of the students, set out by the author (a community psychologist), was that they would conduct the meeting and be meaningfully involved in all aspects of the project from planning to building to running the store. To date, all activity has been filmed and will become a documentary about youth engagement within their community.
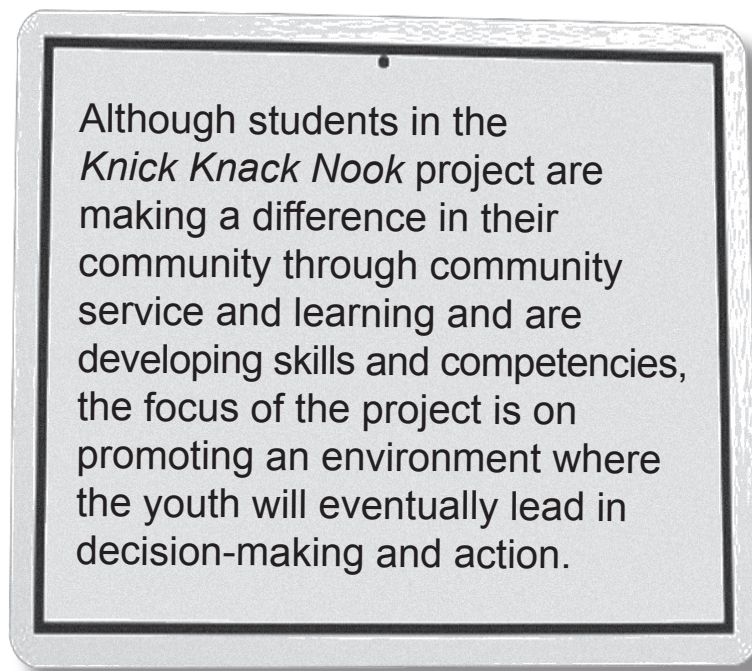
Mobilizing the Community

A date for the community visioning meeting was set and venue determined. The author spent a day with the students of the middle school (n=56), explaining the project, discussing various ideas about running such a store and teaching the eighteen grade 9 students and fourteen grade 8 students how to facilitate and scribe at a community town hall meeting. To garner community-wide support, it was also decided to include the other two island schools (public elementary school and supported home schooling program). An elementary teacher of grades 4 and 5 who is dedicated to recycling answered the call and agreed to include her class in the program (n=30). The older students (grades 4-6) of the supported home schooling program (n=21) also agreed to participate in the project.

Prior to the town hall meeting, all students were asked to draw a picture of their ideal store and discuss with their teacher their ideas of how the store would look and be run. This exercise was conducted to prepare the students with ideas and provide the community with visual presentations of their vision. The drawings ranged from simple line to elaborate painted pictures of an ideal building and surrounding area. They were collected and mounted at the location for the town hall meeting. A public announcement was made in the local weekly newspaper and invitations sent out to all councilors in the municipal government.

In all, 130 people attended the meeting. Ninety-six students from the three schools and thirty-four interested community adults (including three out of seven municipal councilors). Quick introductions were made about the purpose of the meeting, a grade 9 student spoke about how sustainability was important to

youth, a short film was shown about recycling and then the crowd was divided into brainstorming groups. Each group consisted of a grade 9 student facilitator, a grade 8 student scribe, mixed aged students and adults. Three questions were asked: (1) What should this store look like?, (2) How should it be run? and, (3) What should we call it? The brainstorming went on for one hour and then groups of students got up to present their results to the entire meeting. As well, a list of eighty-two suggested names were posted on the wall and each participant was given a sticker to vote on their favorite name.

The *Knick Knack Nook* was born. These participants (mainly students), envisioned a community meeting place that was creative, colorful with funky art and had spaces for younger children to play or read books. Most of the drawings represented a cottage-type building in an open green space. It was determined that it should be open one day on the weekend and another evening during the week. Most of the participants felt that costs for the goods should be minimal, just enough to cover heating and electrical ex-

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penses. They envisioned spaces to sell books, clothing, small appliances, linens, knick knacks, and toys. It was agreed that larger items would not be accepted but a link to an on-line forum would be established. A sign-up sheet was circulated for people to volunteer for further committee work, help run the store, fundraising, assisting with building the store or providing donations.

The meeting created an incredible buzz in the community. People were amazed at how well the students took a leadership role and were able to efficiently run the meeting. Phrases such as "incredible, I didn't know they could do that" or "simply inspiring—gives one hope for the future" were common. People were also surprised that students from the three schools could work together, saying things such as "that has never happened before—they usually compete with each other." One of the three municipal councilors attending the meeting was so inspired that he invited the students and the original organizers to the next council meeting to present their vision. Five adults and three youth attended the meeting and were informed that the mu-

nicipality was willing to support their cause. The council indicated that they were inspired by the vision of these youth and that the *Knick Knack Nook* was a win-win for the community. A motion passed that evening (three days after the town hall meeting), where they donated 1000 sq. feet of land to the project; the speed of this action was previously unheard of from this government.

Training the Adults and Supporting the Youth

Other adults motivated by the town hall meeting decided to join a planning committee to make the vision a reality. At the first meeting, sitting around the table was the author, the zero waste coordinator, the principal from the middle school, the public school teacher, two representatives from a local philanthropic foundation and a retired therapist. The author spent twenty minutes explaining to the group that youth needed to be on the planning committee. With the exception of the zero waste coordinator and the public school teacher, all others were unconvinced. "What can they add?" was the typical response. It was clear that the idea of youth being part of the decision-making aspect of the project, beyond the actual town hall meeting, was a novel and uncomfortable idea for most. They weren't sure how to involve youth in an organizing committee. The second discussion that ensued was "how many do we need?" I pushed for equal numbers of adults and youth, they pushed for two students, we compromised on two representatives from each school (six in total).

My role changed to supporter of the youth and a source of information for the adults. I sent the adults such information as *Youth Voice: A Guide for Engaging Youth in Leadership and Decision-Making in Service-learning Programs* (Justinianno & Scheror, 2001) and *FireStarter Youth Empowerment Program* (Freechild Organization, 2007). Even with all of the information, it was the little things that became important during our monthly meetings. It was clear that the student representatives were a little overwhelmed and intimidated. Our students included two students each from grades 4, 5, and 6. The grade 5 students were supported by their teacher at the public school who ensured they had rides to and from the meeting. The grade 4 students also had an adult teacher's aide who attended the meetings and sat with them. The older students were supported by the middle school principal. Below are some of the techniques that helped integrate the student representatives into the committee:

1. Reducing power imbalances. In order to make the students more comfortable, all members were introduced to the students on a first name basis. For the grade 5 and 6 students, this was a novel experience which they seemed to enjoy (giggling whenever they called their teacher or principal by their first name).
2. Publicly acknowledging and valuing their participation. At the very first meeting with the student representatives, the author thanked them for participating and went on to explain the importance of their input. They (and the adults) were told about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) where Canada and almost every other nation in the world agreed that children have a right to have a say in decisions that take place in their community that impact

them. They learned that they are representing the students from their school and that this was an important responsibility. We also talked about the benefits of being on a committee such as having a say and being able to include their participation on their resumes. They were also assured that if they ever had any questions or concerns, they could bring it up at any time or ask for support from the author or their teacher.

3. Providing information about the process. The older retiree who assumed the chair of the committee was very used to formal committee meetings, following Robert's Rules of Order (Robert, 1982). During the second meeting and watching the confusion on the faces of the youth, the author requested the meeting be stopped to explain the process. We talked about what seconding meant, why previous minutes need to be approved, what consensus meant and why someone was taking notes. Over time, the adults became more conscious of this issue and would stop to explain an unfamiliar term or process.

4. Ensuring students have valued roles and responsibilities. The group was divided into various subcommittees including: fund raising, communications, finding a building and site and volunteer coordination. The youth and I formed the "design and youth facilitation committee." We became responsible for the design of the building, decorating and ensuring participation from other youth in the community. Along with this role, concrete activities where the youth could lead were sought. For example, the youth from the public school were charged with writing up an article for their school newspaper to spread the word to other students, school personnel and the parent community. This exercise resulted in the students paying very close attention to the process, and it gave them notoriety within their school and community. Their school newspaper article was then re-printed in the community newspaper to aid in further dissemination of the project and the students' role.

5. Making the meetings "child friendly." Over time, as the students gained confidence and began to participate more, even the "reluctant" adults began to see the value of their involvement. Before long, people were bringing cookies and juice to the meetings, ensuring that meetings were held at locations and times that supported the students and becoming conscious of their language by simplifying terms without prompting.

It has now become a matter of pride for the adults on the committee that they have student representatives. Of course, vigilance is still needed and mistakes have been made. For example, the students were not included on the undisclosed electronic mailing list for a couple of months. As well, certain members of the committee needed to be reminded not to automatically make decisions in areas that are the students' responsibility. To date, fundraising is ongoing to purchase a building, with the students about to hold a bingo game at a local fair. A project this extensive has seen many phases, from an idea between two adults to a student-run visioning and community mobilization phase to a committee phase including both adults and students. Once the building has been procured, the designing, decorating and running of the facility will be done primarily by the students with help from adults when needed or wanted.

The community has learned some very important lessons from the students involved in this initiative. They have come to understand how knowledgeable and passionate the youth are about environmental sustainability. The youth have also had a tremendous impact on the municipal government with their "just do it" attitude. As well, the capabilities that the youth have shown, such as holding a town hall meeting, sitting on a committee, information dissemination, fundraising, and planning how the facility will be run has inspired and surprised many residents. The author will continue to document this process through film and interviews.

Reflections

The *Knick Knack Nook* example highlights the potential for community service and learning projects to be embedded into larger community development initiatives such as creating *Child Friendly Cities/Communities* (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2004). The child friendly cities movement is a world-wide initiative to research, build and evaluate environments that promote child-environment congruence. This movement was launched in 1996 based on the resolution passed during the second UN Conference on Human Settlements <www.unhabit.org> to make cities livable places for all, particularly children. Three defining features intrinsic to this movement and associated research are: (1) that children and youth are involved in planning and decision-making in compliance with the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); (2) a focus on positive environmental features; and (3) consideration of sociocultural differences of children in the natural and built environment (Chawla & Heft, 2002). According to Horelli (1998):

> Environmental child-friendliness is a community product developed from local structures beyond the individual level. It comprises a network of places with meaningful activities, where young and old can experience a sense of belonging whether individually or collectively. The participation of children and youth in the shaping of their settings plays a central role in the creation of child friendly environments. (p. 225)

In fact, there are key overlapping principles between service learning as described by Wilczenski and Coomey (2007) and Child Friendly initiatives. Three commonalities are *participatory planning and governance, the active involvement of children's voices in the process and the importance of addressing real community needs*. Whether it is for community service and learning or environmental, community or social planning, involving children and youth has become more widely accepted.

More and more research has started to look at *how* to conduct participatory planning with children and youth in authentic and meaningful ways (Cahill, 2004; Checkoway, 1998; Gurstein, Lovato, & Ross, 2003; Hart, 1992, 1997; Skivenes & Strandbu, 2006). Care must be taken to ensure that youth involvement is not tokenism. Hart's (1987, 1992) modified version of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation is a good visual for considering the level of youth involvement. The levels from bottom to top include: adapting children to the planning; listening to children; children taking part in adults' planning; cooperation between children and adults; and finally, children's real participation with adults as assistants.

Suggestions for facilitating higher youth involvement often focus on youth-adult relationships. Gurstein, Lovato and Ross

(2003) recommend co-facilitation, co-leadership and/or co-mentorship between youth and adults. Breitbart and Kepes (2007) recommend that the most basic and essential function that an adult can play is one of supporter; who guides, is an ally, mentor, trainer, ambassador and advocate for the youth. Other features of successful youth participation recommended by The McCreary Centre Society <http://www.mcs.bc.ca/ya_base.htm> include: (1) respect (a non-judgmental, inclusive and inviting environment); (2) skills and tools; (3) models that work (have a vision, but be flexible to change); (4) things to do (tasks); (5) variety of expression (interesting and engaging); and (6) support.

Observations of the youth involvement process associated with the *Knick Knack Nook* corroborate these recommendations. At different stages of the project, the level of youth involvement changed from adult initiated (initial planning) to student run (town hall meeting) to cooperation (committee meetings). Students were given informational support and skills training to provide them a sense of competency. Adults were also provided with information on how to involve students in meaningful ways on committees and in community development. The students were publicly acknowledged for their passion, effort and abilities—stressing the value of their perspective and experiential knowledge. Efforts to reduce power imbalances between the youth and adults were made such as not using titles or ensuring all participants had valued roles and responsibilities. Finally, effort was made to ensure meetings were held at times and in places accessible to the students.

This experience provides a different lens of youth involvement than is presented in Wilczenski and Coomey's book. Although students in the *Knick Knack Nook* project are making a difference in their community through community service and learning and are developing skills and competencies, the focus of the project is on promoting an environment where the youth will eventually lead in decision-making and action. This position is predicated on the principles of *Child Friendly Communities* and the belief that children and youth have a valued and sometimes different perspective of their environment than adults (Jans, 2004; Pivik, 2005), that they have important information to teach adults about community identity and space (Howard, 2006; Chawla, 2002) and that efforts now to involve youth will serve as catalysts for their future interest in community building, planning and civic responsibility (Balsano, 2005; Finn & Checkoway, 1998). Ultimate goals for our current work are that the municipal government will invite youth to be a part of a youth council for decisions that impact them and that there will be an ongoing group of youth who feel confident and have the skills to participate. ➡

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Toward a Global Movement for Community Psychology

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II INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY
Building Participative, Empowering & Diverse Communities
Lisboa, 4ᵗʰ-6ᵗʰ June 2008

This presentation is based on the opening speech of the II International Conference on Community Psychology held in Lisboa, Portugal from the 2nd to the 6th of June, 2008. It is dedicated to

Photo of the Opening Session with Idália Moniz the Secretary of State for Rehabilitation (at the center), with the ECPA President Wolfgang Stark (on the right), the chair of the Scientific Committee Christopher Sonn, Victoria University, Australia (on the left), Maria Vargas–Moniz (Conference Executive Coordinator), and José Ornelas Conference Chair.

all the colleagues, professionals and students who invest a great deal of their lives to community intervention, and it is a message of appreciation to all of those that with their talented work, support and care contributed to this endeavor. The II ICCP 2008 follows the first world-wide effort for community psychology that was the I Conference, held in Puerto Rico in 2005.

The Lisboa event was for us a major challenge both at the national level, and internationally. The partnership created with ISPA (Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada), the Portuguese Society for Community Psychology, and a non-governmental organization AEIPS (Association for the Study and Psychosocial Integration) was crucial to the organization of an event of this scale. There were also two sponsors we were honored to have on board that were the Portuguese State Foundation for Science and Technology, and SCRA.

At the national level we have developed a strategy to disseminate and influence the consolidation of community psychology contributions towards specific fields that we have considered to be politically relevant, where this influence

could be more effective, and bring about renovation and social change. So, for the seven pre-conference institutes held on the 2nd and 3rd of June, there was a selection of specific thematic areas and trainers probing for concrete influences and impacts. The themes selected were *Community Coalitions* (Tom Wolff), *Ending Domestic Violence* (Nicole Allen), *Youth Community Participation* (Sheperd Zeldin), *LGBT and Community Psychology* (Gary Harper), *Recovery and Mental Health* (Bret Kloos), *Collaborative Research* (MaryBeth Shinn) and *Program Evaluation* (Irma Serrano–García & David Jiminez).

The pre-conference institutes required one year of preparation and were opened to the community as a whole, to other scientific areas, and to social movements involved in community organization or community support systems. This initiative was also demanding for the trainers, because each of the institutes required the development of a detailed program that had to be translated and adapted to Portuguese. Every trainer was excellent, both in commitment and professionalism in delivering training and coping with different languages. In all the institutes, we had a total of 300 participants besides those who also participated in the conference.

For the preparation and dissemination of these institutes we developed a very careful strategy combining email advertising, flyer dissemination, presence in more than fifty other national (e.g. conferences were we were invited or arranged to have advertisement) and international events (e.g. Prague, Sevilla, or Utrecht), and meetings with directors of governmental agencies and other organizations to involve the leaders in the pre-conference institutes.

The result was that in the majority of institutes we had the presence of program directors or coordinators, many outside of the field of community psychology, that usually attend these events as speakers or facilitators not as regular participants, and also some students, as well as youth involved in community organizing, people with experience of mental illness, women with personal reports of domestic violence, and junior researchers. The global feedback of participants was that the pre-conference institutes were rewarding experiences, refresh-

Photo of a general panorama of the conference environment.