

Get in the Groove, Let's Make a Move!: Students in Israel Confront a Transition with Service Learning

Abigail S. Chill

Is the anticipated move of a school to a new location a source of curious excitement and optimism or an occasion for trepidation, recrimination, and anxiety? As plans to relocate the Walworth Barbour American International School in Israel from Kfar Shmaryahu (its location for over 40 years) to Even Yehuda became more immediate, teachers and administrators began talking about the stresses and difficulties the move would entail. There would be a great deal of additional work in an already busy year. In the back of our minds, however, we worried about losing the close family feeling we enjoyed on our current campus and wondered how the move would affect the culture of the school. If the adults were asking these questions, what were students thinking, I wondered?

These musings and a newly sparked interest in community service prompted me to pursue implementing a service project connected to our school's anticipated move in March 2007. The project took place in the month following completion of the AP U.S. history syllabus, and although it was not connected to the curricular content, it did match our school wide strategic goal of working towards full student participation in making contributions to society by 2010. My immediate goal was to engage students in a project that would provide an authentic service to the community through an interdisciplinary collaborative experience. In the process, they would be applying many of the cognitive and affective skills that we had addressed during the year. In addition, I intended to build in many of the featured hallmarks of successful service programs, including enabling youth to have a voice, reflection activities, establishing partnerships, and developing and celebrating finished products.

First Steps

I introduced the project by conducting a reflection activity that tapped student attitudes towards the planned move. At this stage, the class had no idea what this was all about, but the novelty of the activity piqued their interest. "As seniors next year, you will be the leaders of the student body," I said. "As you know, the school is planning to move in March, and I was wondering how you feel about it. I have prepared an activity that I think you will find interesting; let's see where it leads us."

On the bulletin board, I posted a horizontal line of signs that read: "Sad, Mad, Worried, Don't Care, Excited, Happy, Can't Wait, So Cool." Each student received four strips of colored construction paper of different lengths. I invited students to tack the longest strip above the word that best expressed how they felt about the move and the remaining three strips of decreasing lengths adjacent to other words that expressed less intense feelings. The shortest strip was to

be affixed next to the sentiment of least significance from their perspective, but one that was relevant nevertheless. This reflection activity produced a visual bulletin board display that "graphed" students' attitudes regarding the move to the new location, Even Yehuda.¹ The longest strips were clustered about the negative or indifferent feelings, while the shortest ones were tacked above the neutral and positive signs. There was clearly a great deal of anger, and concern about how the relocation of *their* school in the middle of *their* senior year was going to impact *their* lives. The discussion that followed helped the community service project to emerge and take form.

Dialoguing with one another, students learned that most of the negative feelings stemmed from a fear that students' lives would be inconvenienced. Students also expressed a feeling of impending loss. I introduced the metaphor of the "travel trunk." "What do you believe we should take with us when we make the move and what can be left behind?" Two defining sentiments emerged from this dialogue and gave direction to the project. The first was: Why should we be enthusiastic about something we know very little about? The second was a feeling that change is tough. The centrality of informed understanding and the challenge of transitions were the key issues with which students were struggling. This recognition generated new approaches. "Perhaps as student leaders, there is some-



thing that we can do that will facilitate the move which is going to take place,” I said. A student chimed in: “We could research the new community, and let people know where we are moving to and what to expect.” The first class meeting was about to end. “Before you leave, please write a comment about today’s class,” I said. “How did you feel about the discussion we had and the project ideas we have generated?” Attitudes ran the gamut from “this is a history class not a social service agency” to “as I listened to my peers, I found that my views were changing from negative to more positive ones.”

By the next class meeting, we had assigned research tasks, but were still unsure of the project’s format. We were in the fact-finding stage. Students conducted interviews and used surveys to find out how a sampling of students (grades 8 through 11), faculty, and community members felt about the anticipated move. Others conducted a “campus walk” with an eye to detecting and photographing important artifacts (plaques, decorations, trees, banners, tro-

phies) that documented the history of our school and that should be transported to the new campus. Two students began researching the municipality of Even Yehuda in order to produce an informative brochure about the community and its offerings. A brainstorming session produced a list of questions that would form the basis of a FAQ sheet about the new school and the move. Finally, local maps were consulted to orient the community to the new location relative to the old, distances and transportation routes. A meeting with the school superintendent was scheduled. The project was gaining momentum.

Implementation

The next turning point came when the school’s superintendent came to class to answer questions, share blueprints, and discuss the timetable for the construction and moving process. This Q&A session validated students’ concerns and provided information for which they were thirsty. Finally, the superintendent invited students to visit the construction site for a guided tour with a faculty

group scheduled to visit the next week. The group of students that attended this excursion came armed with digital cameras to capture the layout of the campus and its special buildings and features. Duly impressed, they reported back to their peers. Positive attitudes began to increase.

As students continued to collect information, we began to discuss the format for our project. How could we fulfill the original goal of providing a proactive service to facilitate this historic change in the life of our school? The class decided to disseminate the information we were learning at a centrally located booth near the entrance to the campus on the evening of the high school awards assembly in early June.² This decision generated an entire new set of questions: “How will we get people to stop at our booth? What will it look like? What is the best way to present our information? Students went scavenging with the maintenance department to search for construction materials and to develop a slogan that would become emblematic of our project. Little by little the plan for the booth took shape.

Light weight wooden beams entangled in PVC piping and wires would form the “roof” of the booth while the back and side panels would create a backdrop on which to affix photos of the new campus’s architectural plans and oversized facsimiles of relevant highway and town maps. Atop it all was emblazoned the students’ slogan: “Get in the groove, let’s make a move!” Two discarded locker doors were spray-painted with the words “Move” and “Groove” and enlarged photos formed four cubes that were suspended from the roof beams to highlight treasured artifacts to be moved to the new venue. An easel displayed “Hockey Marathon Memories.” We had created a “construction site” to represent our new school in process.

On the evening of the awards assembly, parents and students followed newly made signposts and a “path” of colored squares highlighting the favorite events, landmarks, and traditions of our school leading to our booth. There they picked up the brochures and flyers, viewed the visual displays and were invited to share their own feelings about the move by writing a comment on a precut paper “leaf” that was then hung on a “wooden tree.”³ By the end of the event the “tree” was in full bloom with community reflections about the campus, the move and the future. The eleventh graders had certainly raised community awareness about the new school providing much needed information about its location, design and progress while, at the same time, soliciting and validating the importance of feelings in the community.

Reflection and Impact

Ongoing reflection is an essential part of any service program. If learning was to take place, my students would have to think deeply about their personal engagement, the group’s accomplishment and the community’s reaction. At our next class meeting, I introduced the debriefing by inviting students to read and select a favorite quotation about the reflection process from a prepared list and to explain their choices.⁴ Next, I invited them to reflect on the project by having them

create a visual response on an individual white board.⁵ The results were amazing. One girl drew a stick figure with a door closed in her face. “I feel shut out,” she said, “because I am moving back to the U.S. and won’t be part of the new campus.” Three cartoon faces—the first perplexed, the second expressionless, and the third smiling—represented one student’s feelings. “I didn’t quite understand what we were supposed to be doing at first, but as time went on, I began to see the value and was happy with the final product and outcome.” Still others expressed their enjoyment in the creative, artistic, and hands-on process. Next, I tacked up a picture of a binoculars, microscope, and mirror and asked students to reflect on their project experience in light of these metaphors. What small, previously unseen, details had become “visible” (microscope)? What did they learn about themselves (mirror)? What understandings had been brought into focus despite their distance in time or place (binoculars)?⁶ The reflection session created closure and empowered students to seek personal meanings from the entire collaborative process. Finally, most of the students indicated that their new knowledge resulting from their research, meetings, interviews, and peer interactions had helped them to feel more ready for the move and able to see the future in a more balanced and positive light.

The superintendent invited a class representative to speak to the school board about the purpose, process, and outcomes of the project. Not surprisingly, board members were extremely interested in the issue of community morale regarding the new school, and applauded the proactive contribution by the class to facilitating a smoother transition to the new campus and providing a model of community service in action for other students.

Epilogue

Although this project did not emerge from a curricular connection, it was conducted in the context of a class during the school day. Student motivation to participate grew as they partnered with a supportive administration, assumed the role of lead-

ers and recognized their empowerment. Individuals chose to contribute to the success of the project in ways that reflected their talents. Photographers, mapmakers, researchers, writers, designers, artists and public speakers worked together to produce a memorable and complex project. In the process, students dealt with misunderstandings, and frustrations and learned lessons about leadership, and compromise. These students made a mental transition to the new campus and helped the entire community do the same. The brochure they created was distributed throughout the following year to parents, students, and community members. The installation that they built representing the new school, remained a welcoming feature at the entrance to school.

The move to our new campus was delayed until August of 2007. The students who participated in this service-learning project could experience the new surroundings only as alumni. Nevertheless, by confronting feelings, broadening perspectives and recognizing that knowledge and productive action can be important remedies for the malaise that accompanies impending transitions, they helped to prepare us all for the physical transition that we are now in the process of completing. As I contemplate the expanse of our new surroundings, and the state-of-the-art educational facility we now enjoy, I think of the class of 2007, their contribution and their growth, with satisfaction and pride. 🌳

Notes

1. The visual graph was suggested to me by Rakefet Be’eri.
2. The idea for the booth was suggested by Paula Benveniste.
3. Jodi Burns and Kari Smith introduced the “Reflection Tree” at a Reflection workshop held at the National Youth Service Learning Conference in Philadelphia, Penn. (March 24, 2006)
4. Jodi Burns and Kari Smith, “Reflection: The Key to Service Learning,” paper presented at the National Service Learning Conference (March 24, 2006), 10.
5. Reflecting on individual white boards was suggested by Timothy Pettine.
6. Burns and Smith, 2.

ABIGAIL S. CHILL is coordinator of social studies at the Walworth Barbour American International School in Even Yehuda, Israel.