

Differences between the three Ss



The Three Ss: Social responsibility, social service, and social justice

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The three Ss—social responsibility, social service, and social justice—are often confused with one another. What is the same or different about our approach to social issues when we consider these? All three are connected, but serve very different purposes.

Social responsibility is not how many times a student is late for class, nor is it how many times she or he comes to school with incomplete homework. Social responsibility is about fostering students to become responsible and caring citizens. Personal planning and social studies curriculums can be integrated to increase students' knowledge and understanding of democracy and the society they live in. By focusing on skill building, students will learn how to become critical thinkers, and how to reflect and respond to public issues in their community. Learning effective and reflective listening skills and assertive communication skills, students will help develop their self-confidence and resiliency when dealing with controversial issues. Through social responsibility, we have the opportunity to teach students to value diversity and to challenge stereotypes and biases. Students are more likely to participate in a positive and active role in our schools and communities when they feel empowered and know what it means to live in a democratic and socially just society.

Social service is not about pity or judging others' ability to take care of themselves. It is not about restricting access to services or deciding who deserves support. It is about giving donations in-kind or raising money for a cause or an event. When we carry out social service we are doing this in an altruistic manner, not expecting any personal return. It is an attempt to deal with immediate survival needs and to try to provide shelter, food, clothing, medical care, etc., to people who need them. As well, many people donate time and money to ensure animals are cared for, wildlife is protected, and wild spaces are preserved. While social services such as food banks provide food for those who are hungry, this service in itself does not inherently deal with the root causes of hunger, nor does it eliminate the need for food banks. When we carry out charitable events in schools to raise money for others in our communities or in other countries, we are trying to help people to survive. We are not dealing with the underlying issues of inequity and its consequences. Students who participate in charitable events learn empathy and, from these experiences, usually go on to do charitable work in their communities as adults.

Social justice involves righting injustices. It means taking actions that ensure systemic change will occur. It is about making decisions that are responsible and living conscientiously on a daily basis. It is about involving our students in activities that build capacity for an individual or a community. When we are involved in projects that build skills and change the livelihood of others we are creating a civil society, based on respect and caring. For example, community gardens not only give people the opportunity to grow their own food, but also give them the

chance to plan the course of action to be taken and to be equal participants in the decision-making process. When people receive a living wage, versus minimum wage or no wage at all, they gain the ability to make choices and participate in their community on a variety of social and political levels. Social justice is not about allowing an elite group to have power over another group of people or over a community or country. It is not about imposing one set of values on others, but it is about working side by side with others, often in the learner role, to create change.

If we compare the three Ss, we can think of them as three approaches to dealing with social issues. Social responsibility is the educational piece, while social service is a way to deal with immediate and crisis situations. Social justice is direct action to create long-term change, with an analysis of the underlying systemic oppression causing the inequity in the first place. Our students can be involved in local and global projects at all three levels. They can increase their knowledge and awareness of local and global issues. They can raise money and donations for a cause. They can develop relationships with others whom they want to work with, finding out what is important to them and what issues to focus on. They can choose projects that allow them to work side by side with others for change.

As teachers it is our job to communicate to our students about these three responses to social issues and facilitate them to choose projects that will have the greatest impact.