

Service Learning Can Enhance Social Emotional Development*

Service learning is a cost-effective strategy to provide social-emotional learning experiences while fostering academic development. Wilczenski & Cook

John Dewey's educational philosophies of experiential education foreshadowed today's efforts to include community service into the school curriculum (Dewey, 1933, 1938). His work established such fundamental components of service learning as active participation, caring, community building, and establishing connections between school and the real world (Wilczenski & Cook, 2009 Wilczenski & Coomey, 2010).

Education research over many years has supported the importance of situating learning in a meaningful context, and service learning has evolved from experiential education to teaching and learning that encourages both action and reflection. Action in service learning stresses working with others and applying knowledge, skills, and attitudes to service activities. Reflection connects the activities to learning.

Eyler, Giles and Schmiedes (1996) noted "Reflection is the glue that holds service and learning together to provide optimal educative experience." Critical reflection provides students with the opportunity to examine and question their beliefs, opinions, and values. Through reflection, students ask questions, and put facts, ideas, and experiences together to derive new meaning and new learning. Reflection can enhance higher order thinking and problem solving skills, promote deeper understanding of content, and foster positive personal development by enhancing personal and interpersonal knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Service Learning: A Special Opportunity to Promote Social and Emotional Development

There are various ways that schools integrate service learning. For a brief overview, see the Center's brief Information Resources on

> *Service Learning in Schools* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/service.pdf>

> *Natural Opportunities to Promote Social-Emotional Learning and MH*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/naturalopportunities.pdf>

While there are a variety of definitions for service learning, at the core is the idea of incorporating structured, authentic, community hands-on experiences into formal education. This is contrasted with community volunteering that does not include a structured educational connection.

The National and Community Service Act of 1990 described service learning programs as follows:

- Students learn through participation in organized experiences that meet actual community needs.
- The program is integrated into the academic curriculum with time given to reflect upon and process those experiences.
- Students are given the opportunity to use their knowledge and skills in real-life situations within communities.
- Learning is extended beyond the classroom into the community, which fosters a sense of caring and curiosity.

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From: *Service Learning* (U.S. Government, 2021)
<https://youth.gov/youth-topics/civic-engagement-and-volunteering/service-learning>

Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that connects academic curriculum to community problem-solving. Today, elementary, middle, high, and postsecondary schools across the nation participate in service-learning with the support of federal, state, district, and foundation funding. Studies show that, in the past, more than 4 million students from more than 20,000 schools participated in service-learning. Of these participants, high schools were most likely to engage students in community service or to include service-learning as part of their curriculum.

Service-learning is beneficial for students, organizations, and communities. All students, including those with disabilities (e.g., emotional and behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, moderate and severe intellectual disabilities, students with hearing and vision limitations), can be involved in and benefit from service-learning.

In proposed legislation to mandate service learning, the author's office stated the need for the bill as follows:

Service-learning is a powerful instructional strategy for improving the educational performance of pupils, along with contributing to the development of character, values, self-esteem, civic responsibility, and knowledge of local community issues and concerns. Like community service, service-learning requires students to serve their communities. Service-learning, however, takes community service one step further by incorporating the service experiences of students directly into their school work.

http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/15-16/bill/asm/ab_1651-1700/ab_1689_cfa_20160404_171622_asm_comm.html

For schools with service learning programs, activities are generally part of the schools' core curriculum (i.e., included in at least one grade and in at least one subject area such as Social Studies, Science, English). Typically, schools service learning requirements involve a mandated number of hours outside of the classroom and/or participation in a certain number of courses. Some districts report requiring special projects, such as a senior capstone or character education project or activities organized by student and community-based groups. A service learning experience may be a requirement for graduation.

While not emphasized as much as the academic benefits, service learning can be a opportunity to further promote social and emotional development. For this opportunity to be maximized, schools need to ensure service learning programs are designed with a explicit emphasis on promoting social emotional development and learning. This means specifically including a focus on outcomes associated with such development. See, for example, the discussion of five broad and interrelated areas of competence highlighted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): *self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making* (<https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>)

Service learning programs have benefits for all students and can especially benefit students currently manifesting or at risk for learning, behavior, and emotional problems. The activities can increase protective buffers and foster resiliency in ways that reduce problems and enhance problem solving; they can enhance intrinsic motivation for learning, doing, and being; they can be therapeutic; and they can challenge student fundamental assumptions about the world. (Among reported findings are indications that service learning participation is related to less stereotyping and greater acceptance of diversity.)

Student and learning support staff can play a major role by working with service learning programs to ensure they are designed and implemented in ways that promote social emotional development and enhance mental health. More broadly, from our Center’s perspective, a school’s focus on all concerns about mental health and social emotional learning should be embedded in a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports – see *Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html.

What is the Relationship Between Social and Emotional Learning and Service Learning?

From: *Making the case for social and emotional learning and service-learning*
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED505359.pdf>

To some extent, social and emotional learning and service-learning have evolved independently of each other, with different sets of advocates, research studies and practitioners. Yet they have been formed from the same insights about healthy development in children, schools, and society and their interrelationships and mutual benefits are being increasingly recognized.

Both experience and research indicate that quality service-learning can build SEL competencies, while SEL can strengthen the ability of students to be capable service providers. When used together, their effects are enhanced and their impact can be more profound and long-lasting. For instance, service-learning researcher Shelley Billig (2000) has noted that the service experience in and of itself cannot reliably produce viable student outcomes; it can only have strong academic and personal impacts when there is deliberate integration with developmentally appropriate reflection activities. These activities, in turn, are built upon social and emotional skills such as problem solving and relationship-building with peers and adults.

On the other side of the equation, SEL researcher David Hawkins has said that SEL skills are most firmly established when they can be put into practice in a variety of real-life settings and situations – something that service-learning helps to accomplish. He writes that “students who perceive opportunities for involvement in prosocial activities, possess the skills for success, and are appropriately rewarded, are more likely to develop strong bonds to schooling and develop standards, beliefs and behaviors that lead to greater academic achievement and less antisocial behavior.”

Kathleen Beland, creative director for the Character Education Partnership in Washington, D.C., sums up the mutually beneficial relationship between SEL and S-L. “Social and emotional learning provides the skills that help children and youth to act according to core ethical values such as caring, respect, responsibility and honesty,” she states. “Service-learning provides the opportunities for children and youth to apply these skills and the values they represent.”

Concluding Comments

Service learning programs are intended to provide meaningful, real world experiences that promote action, reflection, and acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The emphasis not only is on benefitting students but on benefitting the community and ultimately society. As an integral part of the educative process, involvement in service learning can contribute to the development of character, bolster cultural sensitivity, promote community collaboration, and more. Advocates for service learning programs often stress them as one

way to bolster a wide range of 21st century skills, interests, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., enhance students' civic and career-related knowledge, sense of responsibility, personal well-being).

Research in this area has focused mainly on student outcomes and varies in both quality and reported findings. Nevertheless, most analysts conclude that service learning enhances: (a) civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors, and responsibility, (b) social skills and capital, (c) academic enjoyment, engagement, and achievement, (d) self-esteem and psychological well-being and (e) career-related knowledge, interests, and skills. And participation in a service learning program is seen as playing a role in engaging and reengaging students in school learning and reducing student and schooling problems, such activity is seen as especially promising.

Researchers and policy makers are still coming to grips with all this, and the ongoing challenges of implementation and sustainability are many. Given the sparse resources available for service learning programs, appropriate priority setting requires answers about the political and societal implications and the benefits versus the costs related to such programs. An essential facet of this is assessment of the degree to which they contribute to social and emotional development and mental health concerns.

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 - >Educating Globally Competent Citizens Through International Service-Learning
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuvI3yTF8f0&list=PL29937F0E1677177C&index=2>
 - >Uniting Online Education with Service-Learning
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXir0prOUbU&index=4&list=PL29937F0E1677177C>