

Exploring Civic Practices and Service Learning through School-Wide Recycling

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How do young children make real-life connections to the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship? One way is through Service Learning—a teaching pedagogy and philosophy that addresses real community needs while fulfilling academic goals that meet specific national and state curricula and standards.

Authentic and effective service learning projects offer students opportunities to engage in meaningful and real-life cooperative problem-solving experiences so that they develop the skills related to teamwork, community involvement, and citizenship.¹ Service learning projects encourage young people to challenge existing values while supporting cognitive and social learning and development. In addition, elementary students who engage in high-quality service-learning show an increased awareness of their community needs and develop a greater sense of civic responsibility and ethic of service.²

Recently, teachers in a combined first and second grade classroom in Lafayette Elementary School in rural Oxford, Mississippi, planned a recycling service learning project whose primary goals were to develop community awareness and foster civic responsibility. The project was designed and implemented through the efforts of a student intern, a university faculty member, and two classroom teachers. The semester-long venture fostered cooperation between the principal, a local recycling center, and many children within the school community, as it fulfilled both community needs and academic goals.

In an effort to help students develop an awareness of local community issues and build cooperative problem solving skills, teachers challenged students with open-ended questions: What does the word community mean?; How would you describe your community?; What are some ways you work together with people in your community?; What are some ways you can make your community a better place to live? Then the teachers supplied students with books and resources on the issues, facilitated investigations, and provided a forum to

communicate their results to the community. At every stage, there was rich discussion.

A Model of Service Learning

In April 2008, the National Youth Leadership Council released the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice; these standards revised an earlier service-learning model and resulted in a description of the core components of service-learning, typically referred to as i-PARC/D. These core components (described below) served as a model for this project.³ The acronym i-PARC/D stands for

- *Investigation:* Teachers and students investigate the community problems that they may potentially address. Investigation typically involves some sort of research and mapping activity.
- *Planning and Preparation:* Teachers, students, and adult community members plan the learning and service activities and address the administrative issues needed for a successful project.
- *Action:* Teachers, students, and community members implement the meaningful service activity, which helps students develop important knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and benefits the community as well.
- *Reflection:* Students think about the service-learning experience—its meaning and connection to them, their society, and what they have learned in school.
- *Celebration/Demonstration:* In the final step, students (and adults with whom they may have worked) share publicly what they have learned, celebrate the results of the service project, and look ahead to the future.



The service learning initiative described here began with a community of learners, whose efforts and enthusiasm were aimed at making a difference in their home and school communities. The iPARC/D Model served as an excellent framework for the pedagogy and philosophy of service learning, as we aimed to increase students' knowledge and shape their sense of civic responsibility. The children experienced the joy of learning and an increased sense of importance and pride as they worked toward meeting a real and documented community need. The recycling service learning project was exciting, not only for the students, but, also, for the early elementary teachers who have a passion for placing social and civic education at the center of the elementary school curriculum. The iPARC/D framework helped the teachers guide the children through a learning process that fostered civic responsibility and meaningful service to the community while meeting academic objectives.

Investigation

This stage was sparked by one child's interest in a recycling endeavor that was already underway as a citizenship project by the Boy Scouts. During the discussion of citizenship, the combined class of first and second graders became aware that citizens often participate in local community projects dedicated

to the "common good." Indeed, our students were familiar with neighbors who were ready to lend a hand and family members who frequently supported the school as classroom helpers. Thus, students were aware of community cooperation and had, in fact, been beneficiaries of it.

Within the school community, the children identified several needs by assessing the school grounds. Ideas in the brainstorming session included: feeding the wildlife in the wooded areas around the playground, building bluebird houses for the playground, and cleaning up the playground. Children noticed and were especially dismayed with the litter problem on the playground; thus, they ultimately selected this as a critical need within their capabilities to address. Children, teachers, administrators, and parents reflected on the need to cut down on the amount of trash at home and school.

Having identified a problem, the children sought to generate a plan of action.

Preparation

Through discussions, the children analyzed the trash problem, and, as citizens of their school community, developed a plan to address the litter on the playground. To foster a systemic approach to this project it was crucial that everyone in school

be aware of the plan. Children, teachers, parents and after-school programs used the playground at various times during the day. A viable plan was needed to raise awareness about the litter problem and educate people as to how they could help to alleviate the problem.

Teachers introduced the concepts of “Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle” (3Rs) as ways to deal with trash and litter. Children used specially selected Internet sites, books, and magazines to learn more about the Three R’s of Recycling and about how we are the Earth’s “best friends” for leading a greener way of life.⁴

Action

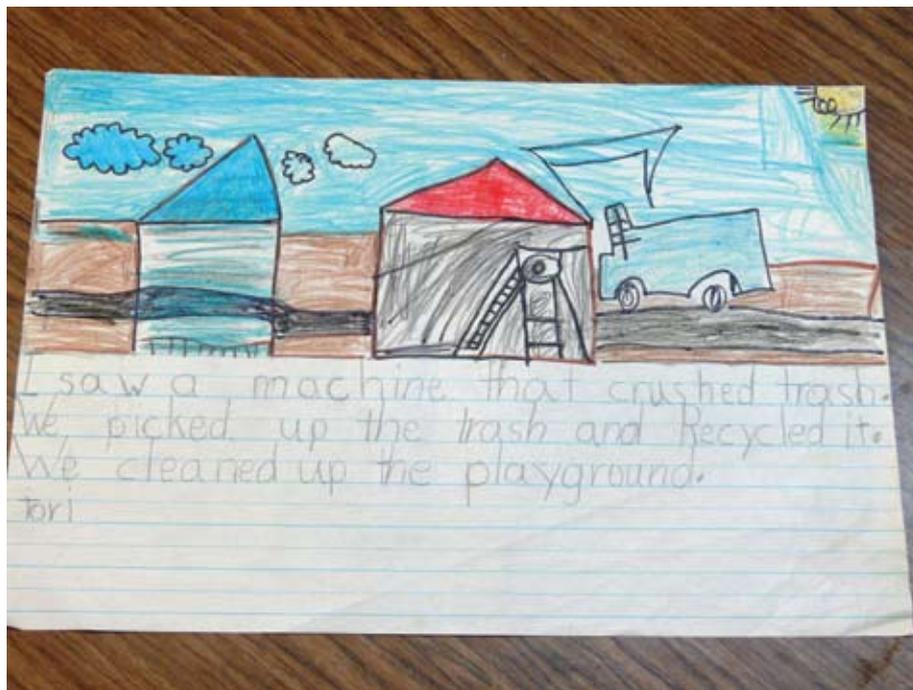
Teachers and children were interested in determining what type of and how much trash was being thrown away, not only on the playground but within the school community. On a designated day and time when the playground was vacated, the children put on gloves and collected the litter from the school grounds. When the children gathered back in the classroom, they spread the trash that they had collected on the floor (which was covered with newspaper). The children sorted their trash in a large, open area. With help from the teachers, students made a web, labeling the different types of trash found on the playground.

They concluded that there were three main categories of trash—paper, plastic, and aluminum. The children decided to create containers to collect each type of trash; they decorated, and labeled boxes for the recyclables in the classroom. Through this activity, they observed that some juice boxes were made of cardboard and others were made of collapsible aluminum, yet both had a plastic straw.

After classifying and counting the contents in each box, the children constructed a vertical bar graph showing the quantity of each type of trash that was collected. The graph was displayed in the school hallway to help educate and encourage cooperation from their peers with trash management efforts. The children concluded that the whole school would need to get involved to address the litter problem. The children took ownership of the project, a key element of the i-PARC/D model.

To promote awareness and encourage community involvement,

the children made posters with “catchy” slogans about the litter problem; the posters were placed around the school and at the entrances to the playground. A few children asked the principal for permission to speak on the intercom to solicit help with their efforts. Participation in the project increased and we placed larger sturdier recycling bins at the exits around the school. Finding ways to reduce, reuse, or recycle the amount of waste within the school community was an even greater challenge than



the litter problem and a very important component of the overall project. Children naturally gravitated to activities that suited their particular learning style. For example, children interested in the use of technology returned the websites to find out more about the Three R’s and ways to implement each of them.

1. Reduce

How much paper is wasted? To determine the amount

of paper wasted within our own classroom, we saved all used paper for a week. At the end of that week, the children counted the sheets of paper and constructed a graph to show the enormity of paper waste collected each day during one week. This graph was shared with the school community, and classes were encouraged to conduct a similar activity in their own rooms. Some of the second grade students helped the first graders with estimation by showing how much paper was used not only in one room but how much paper the whole school would discard in one week based on the numbers in one room multiplied by several classes.

2. Reuse

How can we reuse trash? Thinking and problem solving skills were nurtured as students found ways to reuse collected trash. Some students reported that they reused potato salad containers from the store, others they designed pencil and plant holders, picture frames, jewelry boxes and other discarded items. They discussed the fact that, through their re-use of containers, they would be contributing less trash to the landfill. Sariee asked, “What happens to the unused trash? If you don’t reuse it then where does it all go?” This led nicely to the third R: Recycling.

3. Recycle

In the lead up to Earth Day, the two teachers contacted the director of the local recycling plant and scheduled a visit. Students collected all the bins from around the school and presented them to the director of the plant upon their arrival. During the tour, the children were amazed to discover that they were standing on garbage that had been buried. Akeem was astonished at how small our bins looked. He said, “Wow, the center separated the trash just like we did at school, except their bins are VERY, VERY BIG!” The children saw how the recyclables, traveling on a conveyor belt, were sorted, crushed into cubes, and bundled with wire. They learned where the stacks of recyclables were sent and how plastic milk containers were made into carpet. The children even learned that the toilet paper at the school was made from recycled paper. Each child wrote a personal commitment and signed the class contract to responsibly use and dispose of materials, recycling when possible.

The students also learned the important roles that the city and community play in orchestrating the cooperative efforts among the recycling center, the landfill, and other waste management in our area. Through their trip to the recycling center, the children became knowledgeable about how recycling helps conservation efforts—saving trees, reducing the build-up of garbage and the mass at landfills, and enhancing the beautification of the environment.

Reflection

This stage played a vital role in the children’s academic learning. They were given structured opportunities to reflect on and critically examine their service learning experiences and the knowledge they gained about civic engagement and recycling. Performance assessments and checklists allowed teachers to evaluate the content, skills, and attitudes students learned from the activities.

Activity 1: Learning Journal

To process what they had experienced, children kept double-entry journals; one child provided information in one column and responses from another child were recorded on the opposite side. Some children chose to write and illustrate independently. Rachel pondered the idea that if “we kept burying so much trash inside the world it [the earth] might not stay round anymore!” She depicted her thoughts through a drawing of the world with the northern hemisphere open and trash spilling out over the southern hemisphere. One student wrote about the class trip to the recycling center.

Teachers explained that in some countries where available land is scarce (Japan for example), space for landfills is becoming scarce, and people are more aware of the 3Rs than are most Americans. Some children made a book of their reflections for the class library to remind them and future classes how important it is to recycle.

Evaluation Criteria for Learning Log Journal

I scored students’ performance on all criteria as either “Expert,” “Developing,” or “Needs Additional Help.”

- Writing and drawings include positive attitudes towards civic responsibility
- Information is presented clearly
- Student demonstrates curiosity, interest, and enthusiasm

Activity 2: Awareness Posters

To model how slogans and posters can effectively raise awareness and move people to action, we shared the Smokey the Bear ad campaign. The children quickly realized how slogans can promote awareness of a problem, and they created their own slogans to represent their project. In our combined first and second grade class, 20 percent of the students spoke English as their second language, so working with others on slogans helped them expand their vocabulary. The illustrated slogans students included on their posters (for example, “Splish Splash—Pick Up the Trash,” “I Recycle Paper at Home”) inspired their peers to get involved. The colorful signs were placed on the playground and school building entrances to encourage a cleaner environment.

Evaluation Criteria for Awareness Posters

- Slogans represent causes, consequences, and possible solutions to trash disposal
- Drawings, text, other information match slogans
- Slogans reveal students’ interest, creativity, and continuity of thought

Activity 3: Discussions

In an effort to hear all of the children’s voices, we formed small groups. The teacher (or teaching assistant) with each group posted questions for discussion that included: What were you thinking when you created your drawing (slogan etc)?; Why is recycling important to the community?; What will you tell your friends and family about recycling? How do you think you can help your community by helping people learn about recycling?” Groups discussed potential ways to expand the project, how their work could serve as a model for other student action, and ways to share the information from their project with community officials. Teachers took notes on the comments that students made about each other’s efforts and how the choices people make can affect the environment. For example, Jackson and Seth told the others in their group that their drawing would make people laugh and it would help them pay attention to recycling. Lee said that she wanted to ask her family if she could decorate containers to recycle. She wanted to be in charge of recycling at home. Imir said that if everyone helped just a little bit, then the garbage men would not have so much work to do and the dump would not fill up.

Evaluation Criteria for Discussions

- Discussion reflects understanding of the importance of civic responsibility, includes specific details
- Communication indicates clarity of thought; enthusiasm, interest in the topic, and good listening skills

Celebration/ Demonstration

Celebration and demonstration are other ways that students can educate others about the issues they are addressing. News continued to spread about the project and the children were eager to tell others of their experiences. Students invited the principal, assistant principal, an alderman, the mayor, and community newspaper reporters to our classroom to celebrate

our successes. The children wrote a skit that conveyed their new understanding of recycling and civic responsibility. Old items brought from home were given a new life when the children included them in the skit. Children brought in cleaned empty cans to decorate as pencil holders, shoe boxes to use as containers for art supplies, and egg cartons to secure collections of nature materials and other sorting objects.

The children sang and performed informative skits for our guests. The presence of the city and school officials validated the importance of the students' efforts. The children asked the guests questions or made statements about issues they had worked on in our school community that they now recognized as issues in their town community. For example, Juan stated, "We need more recycling bins in our community." Students were beginning to understand that they could make a difference themselves, and they could also communicate with community members and leaders, extending the good results. The children's involvement in this project helped them become civic-minded and brought them closer to an understanding of citizenship as an active pursuit. They were becoming literate citizens by realizing that they could be part of the solution when addressing community problems.

Extending the Service and Learning

This service learning recycling project was duplicated throughout grades 3 through 6. Administrators, teachers, staff, and students all share responsibility for keeping the grounds neat, reducing the use of paper, and recycling used paper, plastic

bottles, newspapers, and aluminum cans. Employees of the school are responsible for hauling the sorted recyclables to the recycling center each week. The children help keep everyone on their toes. It's common to hear children remind each other not to throw their plastic bottles and scrap paper in the trash, and many

parents have reported a transfer of learning and positive attitudes toward recycling and trash reduction at home.

By taking an active role as citizens of the school community, these young learners recognized their power to improve society. They learned that their voices and actions could make a difference in and beyond the walls of their school. A project largely planned and executed by first and

second graders expanded the traditional notion of Earth Day and resulted in what appear to be structural changes in their school and home environments. Equally important, these students' new understandings of civic responsibility and practices of citizenship may lead to a lifelong ethic of service and civic engagement. 🌱

Notes

1. Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles, *Where's the Learning in Service Learning?* (San Francisco, CA; Jossey-Bass, 1999).
2. Shelley Billig, "Research on K-12 School-Based Service-Learning: The Evidence Builds," *Phi Delta Kappan* 81, no.1 (January 2000): 658-664.
3. Myra Tolbert, "Elements of Effective Service Learning: The PARC/D Model for Academic Learning" (2004), www.cisga.org/partnerships/documents/ElementsofServiceLearning.
4. Deidre Gill, "The Three Rs of Recycling." (2008), greenguideforkids.blogspot.com/2008/01/3-rs-reduce-reuse-recycle.html.

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