

# Learning, Service, and Caring: An Application in the First Grade

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Service learning has long been accepted and promoted as a powerful teaching and learning approach for students at the middle and high school levels. The seminal work of Rahima Wade<sup>1</sup> and others<sup>2</sup> highlighted the potential contribution of service learning in enhancing the social studies curriculum. Service learning is an approach that allows children to learn through active participation in organized service. As such, it is believed that the use of service learning as pedagogy helps teachers to develop civic responsibility in children. Indeed, regarding citizenship, a study of CiviConnections, a program for students in grades 3–12 that links historical studies to civic actions, reported gains in children’s civic knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Although this study examined children who were in grades 3–12, there is now increasing evidence that a service learning approach can be effective with younger children, or those from 3–7 years of age.<sup>4</sup>

In the past few years there has been a surge of interest in adopting service learning as a teaching and learning approach in the early childhood and primary grades, or from prekindergarten to third grade.<sup>5</sup> But, is it appropriate or reasonable for young children to engage in community service? After all, it is well established that young children are egocentric, and so how can we expect them to act in ways that are helpful to others? If we examine what service learning really is, then it becomes clear that it is an approach that is well suited to younger children.

## What Is Service Learning?

Service learning is an instructional approach that connects and combines community service activities with academic learning.<sup>6</sup> It is a method that facilitates student learning through active participation in organized community service. It can be used with students across all grade levels and it can be integrated across all subjects. Further, it can involve a single student, a small group of students, a classroom, or even an entire school. According to Learn and Serve America, “Service learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity changes both the recipient and

provider of the service.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, it is an active instructional approach that integrates service projects with classroom learning. As such, service-learning engages students so that they use what they learn in the classroom to solve real-world problems. It is this experiential element of service learning that is particularly appealing to early childhood educators.

## Service Learning in Early Childhood

Service learning appeals to pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and primary grade teachers because it is an approach that reflects the basic tenets of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP).<sup>8</sup> Developmentally appropriate practice views young children as “active learners, drawing on direct physical and social experience as well as culturally transmitted knowledge to construct their own understanding of the world around them.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, DAP is based on the notion that children learn by actively constructing their own knowledge by interacting with materials, peers, and adults. A major premise of DAP is that learning should be meaningful for children, using practices that reflect their ages and individual needs.

Within a DAP classroom, emphasis is placed on cooperation and collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving. Furthermore, DAP emphasizes the importance of strengthening relationships between children and their peers, teachers, and families. This means that each child is valued for the unique contributions he or she brings to the community of learners. Using a service learning approach provides children with an opportunity to individualize their own learning and, in doing so, to engage a variety of senses and address a number of learning styles.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, service learning can help children engage in authentic inquiry. This is because service learning provides a real-world authentic context that allows children to use investigations and hands-on activities to develop relevant concepts and skills. In sum, service learning in early childhood classrooms provides experiences that are relevant to students’ lives, and a range of benefits that are consistent with a developmental approach, including:

- hands-on learning
- hands-on service
- connecting classroom activities and real-world problems
- projects and activities that meet community needs
- connecting the school curriculum to real world activities
- curriculum enrichment
- experiences that combine learning, caring, and community service

While these benefits of service learning would be of interest to those who are involved in early childhood education, it is probably the inherent nurturing and caring elements that are most appealing. The real value of service learning is that it connects school-based curriculum with the inherent caring and concern people have for the world.<sup>11</sup> One important goal of most early childhood professionals is to nurture caring relations in children and adults. An emphasis on caring is evident in many early childhood practices such as affective teaching, family engagement, and activities that support the development of children's pro-social skills.<sup>12</sup> It is also believed that service learning in early childhood helps build a sense of trust.<sup>13</sup> This is because addressing a social problem requires collaboration and shared intentions, as well as performance.

It is well established that during the primary years, children develop a sense of empathy toward the needs of others.<sup>14</sup> Researchers claim that engaging in service learning influences children's conceptions of how they should relate to others. It follows that service learning can help nurture children's empathy and their understanding of others. This is because reflection is a critical component of every service learning activity. By reflecting on how their actions might have helped others, children develop an understanding of different perspectives, and a more empathetic disposition.

Reflection is considered an important component of service-learning and it is something that should occur throughout the service experience. During the reflection process, students are encouraged to share thoughts and feelings about their involvement in the service activity. It is well established that young children benefit from meaningful activities that require planning, choice making, and thoughtful reflection.<sup>15</sup> Reflection goes beyond mere recall, in that it is "remembering with analysis."<sup>16</sup> During service learning, reflection allows children to process information gained through the service experiences.<sup>17</sup>

Arguably, reflection can be challenging for young children because reflection calls for more abstract thinking. Yet, studies by the High Scope foundation and other researchers provide evidence of the importance of reflection and planning. Indeed,

it is well established that children's ability to plan and reflect gradually develops during the early childhood years. When reflecting, children are assisted and encouraged to think about what they have learned, how they feel, and what they can do to enhance the experience. Reflection helps young children generalize the knowledge or information gained during the learning experience and apply it to other situations. Moreover, young children can be supported by adults so that they engage in reflection through activities such as discussion, exhibition, artistic expression, or dictation.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for using service learning in early childhood classrooms is that it can strengthen student learning. This is because it is an approach that is consistent with recommendations for best practices by numerous professional organizations. In addition to enhancing academic subjects and academic standards, service learning contributes to broader school goals such as social and moral development, and character education.

### Service Learning Approaches

There are four distinct approaches to service learning. The first is direct service. This is where the student service has a direct effect and involves recipients face to face. Children making gifts for senior citizens at a neighboring senior center is an example of direct service. The second approach is called indirect service, whereby service is provided to the community as a whole. As such, the students do not meet or interact with the recipients of the service. A canned food drive is an example of indirect service. The third is the approach called advocacy. As the name implies, advocacy involves students in creating awareness or acting on an issue that is of public interest. An example here would be writing letters to policy makers concerning an issue affecting the school or local community. Finally, research is where students gather information and report on a topic that is in the public interest.

All the above approaches have been successfully used with students in the primary grades. However, experts in the field of service learning in early childhood recommend direct service as the most appropriate and relevant approach for younger students. This is because when students are engaged in direct service, they get to experience the result of their service activity. In turn, the direct experience enables them to reflect on the meaning of their service.

Typically, the service learning process is designed so that it can benefit the community. In early childhood classrooms, community is defined locally such as one classroom, several classrooms, a neighborhood, or perhaps the school. In other words, communities that are familiar to the students.

### Six Stages of Service Learning

For teachers who have never used service learning in their classrooms, getting started can seem quite daunting. Yet, since early childhood teachers recognize the need to make learn-

ing meaningful for children, they are quite adept at seeking out and designing real world, and hands-on experiences. For most teachers, transitioning to a service learning approach is a relatively straightforward task.

GenerationOn has distilled the literature on this topic to compose “six stages of service learning” (see the sidebar) that can serve as a guide for planning and implementing such activities with young students.<sup>18</sup> Getting started with service learning is easier if you start the investigation stage by identifying a need in the classroom or perhaps the school. Also, it is best to start with a short manageable project. Starting with simple activities in familiar environments is preferable because children learn best when they can relate new learning to what they already know.

The following example illustrates a simple, yet effective, service learning project that was designed and implemented in a first grade classroom, although it could be adapted for students in kindergarten or second grade.

### Example: A Paper Recycling Project

This example of a service learning project shows how service learning can be easily incorporated into day-to-day classroom activities. Participating in the project was a class of 20 first grade students in a suburban elementary school. This was the first time the teacher had used service learning pedagogy. The teacher had planned to read the book *Why Should I Recycle?* by Jen Green and Mike Gordon<sup>19</sup> as part of a broader social studies unit on helping others in the community. The teacher felt that there was an opportunity to include a service learning component. Through the lessons and service learning component the students would investigate and understand that natural resources are limited. They would also develop an understanding of several key concepts including recycling, reusing, and reducing consumption of natural resources.

Furthermore, the unit addressed several of the social studies standards developed by NCSS including theme 6 **SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIETY**. Here, the children would be learning about the basics of how recycling works. The unit also addressed theme 9 **GLOBAL CONNECTIONS**, because the children would learn about the need to protect our Earth from pollution and conserve its resources.

Finally, the service project was aligned with indicators for Dimension 4, “Taking Informed Action” of the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards.<sup>20</sup> In this case, students would collaborate with their peers to address a real-world problem. In doing so, they would identify ways to help address a local problem (Dimension 4.7), and also use listening and consensus-building to decide on and take action in their classrooms (Dimension 4.8).

The recycling service learning project would not only complement the curriculum, but it was also something that would be interesting, relevant, and developmentally appropriate. The paper recycling project was implemented by the first graders

in neighboring classrooms; that is, a location that was very familiar, and therefore relevant, to the students. The children participated in direct service by engaging in activities designed to improve the classroom environment. They learned about different ways to recycle, and as they implemented the planned activities, they developed positive attitudes and values.

### 1. Investigation

The impetus for the project was *Why Should I Recycle*, which the first grade teacher read to the students. The teacher and students discussed how so much paper was being wasted, and the fact that too many trees were being cut down to make paper. Here the discussion was driven by the guiding question “What is waste?” Next, the teacher asked the students to brainstorm ideas for how they could recycle paper in the first grade classrooms. Recognizing that asking authentic questions can be challenging for students in the early grades, the teacher developed a “Service Learning KFL chart.” This approach involves engaging students in documenting, “What I know about the problem”; “How I feel about the problem”; and “What I hope to learn from the project.” In doing so the students talked about how much paper was being wasted in their classroom; and they wondered whether the other first grade classes also wasted paper.

### 2. Preparation

Guided by the teacher, the class decided to visit each of the other first grade classrooms to find out whether they had a recycling bin for paper. Small groups of students returned from their visits to the other classrooms reporting that none had recycling bins. Then, the teacher and students decided that they would make paper recycling bins for the first grade classrooms.

### 3. Action

First, the children worked in small groups to create recycling boxes. They used crayons and sharpies to decorate large cardboard boxes. Some chose to draw a large green recycling logo on the side of their box. Others labeled their box in large letters “Paper Recycling.” After the boxes were completed, the children delivered them to each of the first grade classes, explaining what the recycling boxes were to be used for. They also informed the classes that they would come and collect the recycling boxes once a week, and empty them in the bin behind the school

### 4. Reflection

Before visiting the other classes, the students talked about how much paper they threw in the trash. After their classroom visits, they reflected on how much paper had been discarded. The teacher asked reflection questions such as, “What did the other classes have to say about recycling?” and “Why do you think recycling is important?” Finally, students reflected on

the whole experience by drawing and writing about it in their journals. For this activity the teacher adopted the use of “Service Learning Reflection Activity” (Lake and Jones, p. 84) which provides students with a series of reflection prompts such as:

- I learned that ...
- Learning this made me feel ...
- The best part of the project was ...
- We can make this project better next time by ...

In reflecting on their service learning project, the students demonstrated the wealth of knowledge they had gained. Students’ oral and written responses suggested that they understood the importance of recycling paper and caring for the environment. More importantly, they revealed perspectives about caring skills and behaviors.

### 5. Demonstration

The teacher invited a small group of fifth graders to visit the classroom to interview the first graders about their recycling project. The video recorded interviews, along with photos of children using the recycling boxes, which were then featured on the next morning’s school news bulletin. The demonstration helped extend the project beyond the classroom to the broader school community so that students in other grade levels were made aware of the impact of human activity on the environment.

### 6. Evaluation

Finally, the teacher engaged the students in an evaluation of the service learning project. Guiding the evaluation were the following questions:

1. What would be a good name for this project that we just finished?
2. What did you learn from this project that you didn’t know before?
3. How was the project helpful?
4. How did your project help our school and the environment?
5. What other things have you done to be helpful since working on this project?

In discussing the project, the teacher reported that the students were enthusiastic and that they seemed to have a better understanding of the importance of recycling. She also noted that the students recycled paper in the classroom and that there was less paper in the garbage can. Most noteworthy, according to the teacher, was the enthusiasm with which the students engaged in the project: “The project was very effective, and the students really got into it and wanted everyone to know about it. They understood why we were doing the project and how it was helping to reduce waste.”

## The Six Stages of Service Learning



1. **Investigation:** Students use critical thinking to analyze community needs and assets, and student interests. This stage could emerge from children’s books, the curriculum, or children’s observations and interests
2. **Preparation:** The teacher and students decide what the project will look like, and how long it will take. Preparation involves acquiring knowledge and skills aligned with academic objectives and collaborating with community partners to create a service plan.
3. **Action:** Students engage in meaningful and creative service that enhances learning and provides guided practice in social responsibility.
4. **Reflection:** Students communicate feelings, experiences, and learnings. Reflection is considered a critical stage of service learning because it is where the teacher helps children understand their service learning experiences.
5. **Demonstration:** Students showcase the service-learning experience and demonstrate insights and outcomes to the community.
6. **Evaluation:** The teacher assesses student learning and the service-learning experience as a whole to identify successes and areas for improvement.

SOURCE: GenerationOn, “IPARDE Resources,” [www.generationon.org/page/iparde-resources](http://www.generationon.org/page/iparde-resources).

## Pedagogical Value

The above example illustrates the active and authentic nature of service learning. The students were able to address a problem within their own classroom and, by involving the other classes, to make an impact on the wider school community. Learning activities became meaningful and relevant for the students, enabling them to participate in a positive community social experience by doing something productive. Prosocial dispositions, such as caring and serving, were nurtured. By caring for the environment, students developed important skills; their learning was enhanced by serving; and they developed positive attitudes and skills for being responsible citizens.

This example also shows that service learning can be incorporated into the curriculum. Yet, teachers who are new to service learning are often concerned that service learning might take time away from teaching the academic curriculum and ensuring that academic standards are met. However, by examining the curriculum and planned activities, with some minor alterations, a service learning element can be added. The biggest hurdle for those who are new to this approach is shifting their perception of service learning as simply “something else to do” to “part of the curriculum.” Viewed this way, teachers will find novel ways to integrate service learning into the school curriculum. Then, as teachers become more experienced in using a service learning approach, they will provide a more enriched curriculum that includes truly meaningful learning.

Teachers understand that teaching a core of academic subjects is important in the early grades. Service learning is an approach that allows teachers to effortlessly weave interdisciplinary themes into those core academic subjects. Then, through service projects, themes such as global awareness and civic literacy can be integrated into the academic curriculum. Furthermore, skills such as critical thinking and communication can be enhanced without abandoning academic standards.

## Conclusion

Service learning is an approach that enables children to learn through active participation in organized service. It is evident that service learning can be effectively used with younger children and that it is appropriate to engage young children in community service. There are many compelling reasons for using service learning as pedagogy with young children. The most important, perhaps, is that it is an approach that closely matches the way young children learn. It is also consistent with approaches for best practices by various professional associations. It can easily be incorporated into the early childhood curriculum in ways that will make learning authentic, meaningful, and relevant. Using service learning enhances academic content and fosters prosocial behaviors and civic responsibility. As an application in early childhood education, service learning can enrich children’s classroom experiences by engaging them in learning, service, and caring. 🌍

## Notes

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**Service Learning:** A student from John F. Pattie Sr. (Pattie) Elementary School in Dumfries, Virginia, participates in Keep America Beautiful's Recycle-Bowl competition for K-12 students, teachers, school administrators and facility managers, and PTA/PTOs and other parent groups. The contest runs for four weeks each fall, culminating on America Recycles Day, November 15th. Visit [www.kab.org](http://www.kab.org). (Photo courtesy KAB)