

Service Learning in Preschool: An Intergenerational Project Involving Five-Year-Olds, Fifth Graders, and Senior Citizens

Nancy K. Freeman^{1,3} and Sherry King²

Service Learning is a powerful form of experiential pedagogy that is gaining popularity in classrooms from preprimary settings through graduate school. It involves students in activities that explicitly and intentionally integrate community involvement with appropriate academic objectives. This article describes an intergenerational service learning project that brought together preschoolers, golden-agers, and at-risk elementary-aged students. *Lunch Time Book Buddies—Pass It On* included both direct service and indirect service and made valuable contributions to young children's developing literacy, social-emotional, physical, and cognitive abilities.

KEY WORDS: service learning; intergenerational; emerging literacy; experiential learning; preschool.

INTRODUCTION

Service Learning (S-L) is an increasingly popular pedagogy which explicitly connects community service with appropriate learning objectives. Well-planned S-L activities (a) meet authentic community needs, (b) are collaboratively planned by school and community representatives, (c) enhance and support students' academic development by providing opportunities for them to use newly acquired skills in real-life situations, (d) include opportunities for in-depth reflection, and (e) celebrate and acknowledge the success of participants' efforts. (Belbas, Gorak, & Shumer, 1993; Fertman, 1994).

There are three major formats for service learning: face-to-face hands-on interactions are *direct service*; *indirect service* projects involve students in meeting the needs of unseen others, for example collecting food for the local food bank; and *civic action* or *advocacy* projects such as letter writing (or picture drawing) cam-

paigns, which inform policy makers as they prepare to make decisions that will affect the school or community, are a third kind of service learning. Service learning activities most often extend into the surrounding community, but it is possible, particularly when working with young children, to implement meaningful service learning projects that remain within the school's parameters.

Benefits of Service Learning Pedagogy

Service learning is appealing to teachers who embrace experiential learning because it enhances learning while engaging students in meaningful activities. Successful S-L experiences contribute to students' mastery of academic objectives, fulfill unmet community needs, and support learners' social development, sense of self-worth, and competence (Erickson & Anderson, 1997; Gomez, 1999). The potential of service learning is likely to be readily apparent to teachers of elementary-age students who could be successful collecting, delivering, and sorting donations to a local food bank or to those working in high schools where neighborhood fix-up projects might give their students an opportunity to integrate academic content into a community-based service activity. Early childhood educators working with preschoolers have been slow to recognize the promise of S-L however, perhaps because they have not identified appropriate service projects.

¹University of South Carolina, College of Education, Columbia, South Carolina.

²Kindergarten Teacher, University of South Carolina Children's Center, Columbia, South Carolina.

³Correspondence should be directed to Nancy K. Freeman, University of South Carolina, College of Education, ITE—Early Childhood, 107 Wardlaw, Columbia, South Carolina 29208; e-mail: nfreeman@gwm.sc.edu

Once early childhood educators have become informed about S-L they are likely to readily appreciate its potential. That is because they recognize how S-L has the potential to enhance and support children's developing prosocial behaviors: caring, empathy, altruism, helping, and sharing. And those who know preschoolers well realize that they thrive on opportunities to be "helpers," and that they can effectively contribute to their community in meaningful ways that support their emerging independence and sense of self-efficacy (Patchin, 1994).

Service learning fits comfortably within the well-established theoretical framework created by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Noddings (1992) who observe that a sustainable society relies on citizens who "have learned the sensitivities, motivations, and the skills involved in assisting and caring for other human beings" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 p. 53). They would agree that children learn to care as they look beyond themselves, replacing a preoccupation with self and close family members with a concern for unknown individuals, the environment, and even the world of ideas (Noddings, 1992).

Serving and Learning Begin in the Early Years

Goldstein (1998) has applied these theories of caring to early childhood education, describing the characteristics of a care-based primary classroom. Her study is an extension of the work of Noddings as well as a number of researchers who have explored other dimensions of young children's prosocial abilities. Eisenberg (1992), for example, found that as early as the first 2 years of life infants and toddlers responded to others' needs when they have the opportunity to help out in authentic ways. Likewise, Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, and Chapman (1992) document that repeated exposures to significant adults who demonstrate caring incline preschool-aged children to be prosocial and exhibit helping, giving, and sharing behaviors.

Not unlike other learned behaviors, caring and sharing are likely to become more frequent when they are met with appropriate, specific praise or admiration (Wittmer & Honig, 1994). Making explicit the ways an act of caring has made a difference in someone else's life helps the child attribute these characteristics to him or herself and helps youngsters appreciate why acts of caring are desirable (Kitzrow, 1998). Furthermore, praise for specific prosocial behavior provides children with concrete ideas about how to sustain positive social relationships (Eisenberg, 1992).

It is worthwhile to invest in nurturing young children's developing prosocial dispositions because there is

evidence that early experiences have lifelong effects on children's conceptions of how they should relate to others and to the environment. Kitzrow (1998), for one, noted that parents, caregivers, and teachers play a critical role in helping young children develop these desirable prosocial dispositions. And Honig and Wittmer (1996) and Noddings (1992) demonstrate that being engaged in caregiving activities, and receiving validation as a carer are experiences which help children clarify the dynamics of self-other relations and develop a positive sense of self. Helping children become altruistic, caring, and responsive in developmentally appropriate ways is an important responsibility shouldered by early childhood educators.

Knowledge of S-L pedagogy can help teachers see serving activities in a new light and may help them identify connections between specific curricular goals and hands-on experiential learning. It is one way to help children become compassionate and empathetic in a society where individuals too often focus on themselves and are preoccupied with materialism and conspicuous consumption (Holst, 1999). As teachers think about implementing service learning with young children it is particularly important to be realistic and sensitive to their abilities and interests. They must recognize, for example, that for their youngest students, "the community" is likely to be the toddlers in the room next door or the babies down the hall. Older groups of preschoolers, however, can extend their activities beyond the confines of their school or child care center. Then their work will look more like S-L as it is implemented with older students. Sensitivity to others' needs, knowledge of the community, a desire to develop innovative partnerships, and some creative thinking can uncover opportunities to involve young children in meaningful, worthwhile projects that meet all S-L criteria.

This paper describes a successful intergenerational S-L project that linked a class of 4- and 5-year-olds with two groups of neighbors, the community Senior Center, and fifth-graders from a nearby elementary school. These activities were very satisfying for young children, golden-agers, and preteen participants alike. The project's success demonstrates that time and effort invested in making the links between community service and academic learning explicit is well spent, whether participants are 5, 75, or somewhere in between.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE LEARNING

Successful service learning projects are a unique blend of community involvement and effective teaching.

Teachers need to build in time to develop collaborative relationships as well as to handle the logistics involved whenever children are preparing to venture out into the community or teachers from several classrooms coordinate their schedules so their children can work together. Following these guidelines will assure teachers' success as they implement S-L.

1. Identify *organizations* that sponsor programs where your students could perform service.
2. Identify *curriculum content* most likely to be successfully integrated into service learning.
3. Identify *funding sources* that might supply support for service learning activities.
4. Plan reflective *exercises* to help students and teachers assess the successfulness of service learning activities.
5. Plan to *acknowledge and celebrate* the project's success.

THE LUNCH TIME BOOK BUDDIES—PASS IT ON PROJECT

Lunch Time Book Buddies—Pass it On was a S-L project that included both direct and indirect service. It gave 4- and 5-year-olds the opportunity to make several visits to the community Senior Center to eat lunch and visit with their golden-aged Book Buddies. After lunch, one-on-one conversations focused on the familiar books the children's teacher had brought in her backpack. As part of each visit children and seniors signed their names in the books they had shared and children took time to draw and write in their personal journals. At the conclusion of the project fifth graders from a nearby elementary school spent an afternoon reading and playing at the Center and took the books used by the Lunch Time Book Buddies back to their school where they were distributed to children identified for being at-risk who were likely to own few books of their own. (Illustration 1)

Lunch Time Book Buddies—Pass It On, based on the theoretical framework of S-L described above, was appealing to teachers, children, and parents at this campus preschool that embraces a constructivist educational philosophy. It enhanced preschool children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development while enriching the lives of neighboring senior citizens and school-age children alike.

Preparing to be Book Buddies

Children prepared for their visits to the nearby Senior Center by discussing what they knew about getting along with elderly friends and relatives. Many of our

students do not see their grandparents regularly, so having the opportunity to interact with healthy, active senior citizens was a valuable one. They discussed the importance of having good manners while they were eating, and observed that older friends might move slowly or may need them to talk more loudly or more carefully than usual.

Children also prepared for their first visit, and every visit, by reading and rereading the books they were preparing to take to their Book Buddies story time. It was important that Sherry King plan how these Book Buddies experiences would enhance children's literacy development. One way she did that was to make sure that they heard the stories several times. The Book Buddy books were kept in a special box so they would not get mixed up with the classroom collection and children were encouraged to ask their teachers and classroom visitors to read them regularly. One objective was that children would know some of these books "by heart" and that they would "read" them to their Book Buddy.

Throughout the Book Buddies project Sherry consistently reminded her students that they would *Pass It On*. Using books that they would eventually share with children who might not own any books of their own reminded our preschoolers of the indirect service dimension of this S-L project.

Visiting the Senior Center

Children enjoyed walking through an attractive residential neighborhood to the near-by Senior Center. Finding a destination within walking distance makes S-L projects less expensive and simplifies logistics.

Children and adults identified a reading buddy each time they visited. We did not make any attempt to assign children to particular adults, for we knew that could lead to disappointment if one or the other were not there, but it was not unusual for children and adults alike to remark how pleased they were that their special friend was there week after week, and several pairs worked together every time they were together. After locating a buddy (and sometimes two) the seniors took us to the lunchroom where they helped children navigate the buffet line and settle down to eat. Lunch time was a chance to get acquainted, renew friendships, and enjoy food and fellowship.

Before long the group moved to the activity room where two or three lunchmates headed to a quiet spot where they could enjoy the books the children had brought from their classroom. This was the most intense part of the Book Buddies program. It was interesting to

ZORA APRIL 28 2002
SENIOR CENTER



Illustration 1. Zora drew a picture of lunch time at the Senior Center. Her caption reads "Senior Center."

see how some children easily read the books to their new-found friends; others recited their books from memory, getting most of the words right; some "read" the pictures; and still others relied on adults to read the books to them. (Pictures 1 and 2)

Not only did the children's approaches to the books vary, but so did the seniors'. Some adults expected the children to read independently and focused on word attack skills. Others took a more holistic approach, drawing children's attention to how they could "read" the pictures and make good predictions about what would happen in the story. Still others read to the children, giving them the opportunity to hear a story they enjoyed. Book Buddies usually had time to read two or three books before children were getting restless and adults' reading voices were wearing thin. On the first visits Sherry noticed that shorter books and predictable books worked better than longer ones, and made it a point to favor these titles as she planned return visits.

When a pair of Book Buddies finished reading a book both the adult and child signed their names inside the front cover. This ritual emerged spontaneously, and it was a very effective and meaningful one. As the book-

reading activities were winding down each week, children drew something they remembered from the book or books they had read and also drew pictures of their visits with their Book Buddies. These artifacts are meaningful reflections that show how young children recreate memorable experiences with words and pictures. (Pictures 3 and 4)

Celebrate Reading

The Book Buddies project was frequently cause for celebration. The children basked in adults' one-on-one attention and the senior-citizen buddies demonstrated the joy and satisfaction they derived from time spent with bright-eyed, eager youngsters. Adult participants' comments indicated that they thought what they did was beneficial for the children, and we observed that they enjoyed the time together as much as the young children did. We knew we had been successful when they encouraged Sherry and her class to make return visits.

There was one particularly poignant moment when Sherry learned that one of the senior Book Buddies had died suddenly. He had been a regular participant and clearly enjoyed interacting with our young children. We



Picture 1. Anica McBeth-Williams and Seth Lyons enjoy a book with Sara Maxwell.

were glad Sherry had a picture of him reading with his Book Buddy and she was glad to have this memento to send to his family. They expressed their appreciation for that token of appreciation, and we treasured our memories.

Celebrate Passing it On

The most obvious celebration of the success of this project took place when three fifth-graders from the neighboring elementary school came to visit the Chil-



Picture 2. Raymond Jackson reads to Ajhia Lingard and Obi Nwajiaku.

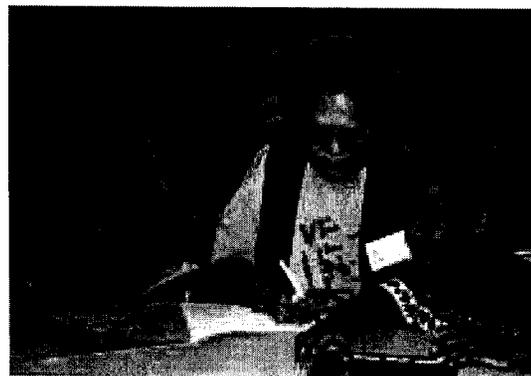


Picture 3. Myra Grinnage is helping Aaron Williams figure out the words on this page.

dren's Center. They took the 137 books children had collected back to their school for distribution to particularly at-risk schoolmates. Linking with this literacy project for school age children gave our S-L project an important dimension. The elementary-schoolers have become regular visitors to the Center, and when fifth-graders who have been struggling readers have the chance to read to our 5-year-olds the pleasure and motivation is palpable. It seems that we have been successful spreading the joy we find in reading and our enthusiasm for service learning pedagogy.

Learning

It is important to remember the S-L combines community service with learning. This hands-on project enhanced preschool children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.



Picture 4. Rose T. Chai is signing her name in the book she, Elijah Malik Witherspoon, and Zora Iman Mayo read together. They will pass this book on to a student at A. C. Moore Elementary at the end of the semester.

It would be natural to expect a reading project to support children's emerging literacy skills. We saw children immersed in the kinds of emotionally warm lap-reading experiences that support their growing interest in, and competence with, the written word. When children wrote their names in each book and made journal entries as part of *Lunch Time Book Buddies* another dimension had been added to the literacy learning supported by the project. (Illustrations 2 and 3)

This project included many opportunities for meaningful social interactions as Book Buddies ate lunch and read together. This activity also developed students' emerging empathy, for they became increasingly sensitive to and able to anticipate and accommodate others' needs when they were visitors to the Senior Center.

Our young children faced another kind of challenge to their social and emotional development when the fifth graders came to visit their school. Then they had to think about how to welcome their guests and meet the needs of older children. Opportunities to be guests and also hosts were direct service components of this S-L project.

Walking to the Senior Center was a physical challenge for these youngsters. The sometimes-hilly terrain

stretched children's stamina. Singing and marching helped them pass the time, but it was, without a doubt, a stretch for some. Many were ready for a nap when they returned after lunch—Book Buddies days were busy ones!

CONCLUSION

Interest in helping young children learn to care for others is not new, but children need the support of teachers and other committed adults in their efforts to develop a repertoire of prosocial attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. We know caring does not start sometime in the future, it can and should begin in the present as we ensure children of all ages appropriate opportunities to care for themselves, others, and the living and nonliving environment that surrounds them.

Service learning activities are particularly well suited to fill these roles. It is a pedagogy that deserves increased consideration by teachers of young children who value the prosocial behaviors that are the bedrock of our democracy.

It has been rewarding to consider the success of our

The senior citizens dancing
while I ate lunch 2-18-2000
AARON

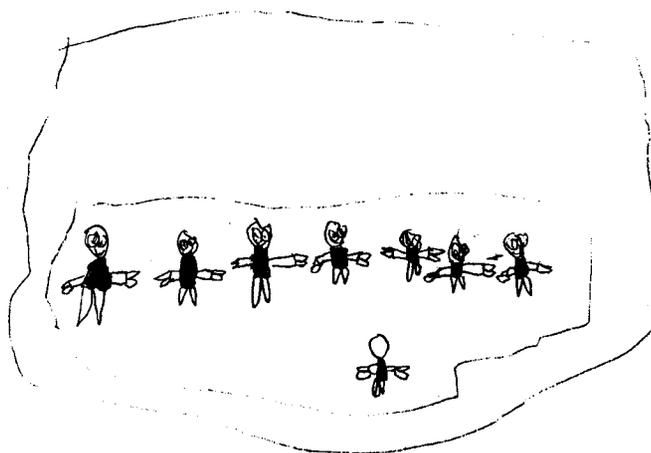


Illustration 2. Aaron drew a picture of the seniors dancing before lunch, his caption reads, "The senior citizens dancing while I ate lunch."

I am reading a book to the lady while Anica and Aaron watch.
 Watch. 2-18-2000 Naini

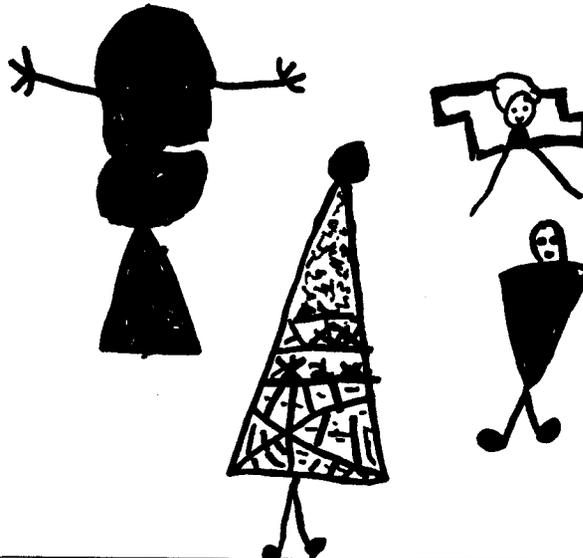


Illustration 3. Naini used bright colors to tell her story: "I am reading a book to the lady while Anica and Aaron watch."

efforts from a variety of perspectives. This project has demonstrated the joy that lively youngsters can bring to our neighboring Senior Center, and we are also confident our preschoolers benefited from interacting with children about twice their age. We have no doubt that the books we have provided send a positive and valuable message about the joys of reading to the children who eventually become their proud owners.

Successful S-L activities have great potential for success, but success is no accident. Effective S-L experiences require teachers to lay the groundwork and show persistence. Extending the early childhood classroom into the community can be a time-consuming, labor-intensive, tiring, and extremely rewarding undertaking—ask the Book Buddies, they know!

REFERENCES

- Belbas, B., Gorak, K., & Shumer, R. (1993). Commonly used definitions of service-learning: A discussion piece. National Service-Learning Clearinghouse. Available internet: <http://www.nicls.coled.umn.edu/who/ncsta93.htm>.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Eisenberg, N. (1992). *The caring child*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Erickson, J., & Anderson, J. (Eds.). (1997). *Learning with the community: Concepts and models for service-learning in teacher education*. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.
- Fertman, C. I. (1994). *Service learning for all students*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.
- Goldstein, L. (1998). More than gentle smiles and warm hugs: Applying the ethic of care to early childhood education. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 12(2), 244–261.
- Gomez, B. (1999, March 15). *Service-Learning: Every child a citizen*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States Issue Paper.
- Holst, C. B. (1999). Buying more can give children less. *Young Children*, 54(5), 19–23.
- Honig, A. S., & Wittmer, D. S. (1996). Helping children become more prosocial: Ideas for classrooms, families, schools, and communities (Part 2). *Young Children*, 51(2), 62–70.
- Kitzrow, M. (1998). An overview of current psychological theory and research on altruism and prosocial behavior. In R. Bringle & D. Duffy (Eds.), *With service in mind: Concepts and models for service-learning in psychology* (pp. 19–34). Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.
- Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Patchin, S. H. (1994). Community service for five-year-olds (and laughing all the way). *Young Children*, 49(2), 20–21.
- Wittmer, D. S., & Honig, A. S. (1994). Encouraging positive social development in young children. *Young Children*, 49(5), 4–12.
- Zahn-Waxler, C., Radke-Yarrow, M., Wagner, E., & Chapman, M. (1992). Development of concern for others. *Developmental Psychology*, 28, 126–136.