

Introduction

Following is the story of a service learning project titled “Sunshine in a Pot,” completed by a group of students in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. With the help of two teachers, the children grew flowers from seeds, planted them in pots they decorated, made greeting cards, and delivered the cards and flower pots to patients in a local hospital. In the process, the students learned about a plant’s parts and life cycle, about human illness and injuries, and about empathy. Following are the words of one of the teachers reflecting back on the project.

Sunshine in a Pot

“Before we began the activity, I explained to the students that we would be helping others by spreading a little sunshine through the gift of a potted flower. We discussed the local hospital and the reasons why people had to stay there: sickness, injuries, cancer, pregnancy, etc. We also talked about how sad it can be at the hospital because you aren’t at home with your family and usually you aren’t feeling well. The students were able to participate in the conversation and many discussed situations where their own family members had been in the hospital.

“After our lengthy discussion, I told the students that they would be painting a pot and planting a flower in it for someone in the hospital who was ill or injured. The students asked if they would be taking the pots to the hospital themselves, and I explained that I would be taking the pots there after school. I asked the students, ‘Do you think the patients will like getting a gift like this in the hospital?’ All the students said yes, and one student said, ‘We sent flowers to my grandmother when she was in the hospital, and she liked them.’

“The students seemed very interested in the activity and everyone did a wonderful job painting their pots very colorfully. We planted pretty purple flowers called Hawaii Blues. The activity took the entire day to complete because we worked in small groups. They painted the pots in the morning and planted the flowers in the afternoon. I was very surprised that no one asked to take theirs home; this showed they understood the reason for the activity, which was helping others.”

—*Ashley and Dawn, preservice teachers of preschool through first grade, Tallahassee, Florida*

In their own reflections on the project, here are examples of what the students had to say:

- “We need to be nice to people who are sick.”
- “Giving someone a present can make them feel better.”
- “We made people feel better by giving them the pot and flower.”
- “We made cards for them, too. My card said, ‘Happy Spring and Get Well Soon.’”
- “We had fun making a present for someone who is sick.”
- “It made sick people smile, because someone cared about them.”

It is clear from this example that service learning can be a powerful tool in reaching, teaching, and inspiring young children. In this modern, rapidly changing world, quality early education is essential for our students’ future success. This success is defined not only in academic terms but also from a social, civic, and moral perspective. Thus, teachers need opportunities to enrich children’s learning that support high academic standards and, at the same time, foster children’s social

development by teaching them to be good citizens. The methodology of service learning offers teachers these opportunities.

In recent years, service learning has gained a strong foothold in middle grade and secondary classrooms, and it is time to employ its many rich benefits at the early childhood level. Our goal in writing this book is to provide you, as a preK or primary grade educator, with a solid understanding of how service learning can be effectively used with young children. We also aim to help you see the connections between the philosophical basis of service learning and the practice of service learning. To this end, we have included a theoretical rationale for service learning in early childhood, as well as stories from a variety of classrooms in which 215 preservice teachers in our Florida State University program conducted field trials with over 3,500 students in preschool through grade three. These stories serve to highlight how teachers and programs can integrate service learning into applied practice, aligning with academic learning standards in all content areas while providing developmentally appropriate experiences for young children. The wealth of examples of tried-and-tested projects demonstrates how service learning meets the needs of young children in developmentally appropriate ways; in short, they show meaningful early childhood learning at its best.

Service Learning in the PreK–3 Classroom is also intended for those who work with you on all levels—administrators, counselors, parents, members of a professional learning community, preservice teachers, college faculty, and others. Simply put, it is for education professionals and students everywhere who seek a better understanding of service learning and its role in the early childhood classroom. The book is subtitled *The What, Why, and How-To Guide* because its practical approach develops the background knowledge and skills you need to effectively use service learning as pedagogy in programs for young children.

About This Book

The text is organized into four parts: the first part explains what service learning is and can accomplish; the second part provides tools and templates for implementing service learning in the classroom;

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the third part shows examples of service learning projects that have been carried out with all ages of young children; and the final part describes how service learning is rooted in solid academic theory and can be used as part of a teacher education or professional development program.

Part One: Service Learning in Early Childhood—A Primer addresses the background and purpose (the “what” and “why”) of service learning in early childhood education. It provides you with a context in which to learn about the reasons for doing service with young children and guidelines for implementation.

Chapter 1 defines service learning and outlines the principles and standards upon which it is based. In **Chapter 2**, you will read an overview of the theoretical rationale for using service learning with young children, as well as how the practice supports character education, differentiated instruction, and other important classroom initiatives. **Chapter 3** outlines how service learning in the early grades can support high academic standards as outlined in national and state policies and documents. In **Chapter 4**, we recommend how to effectively design service learning for early childhood programs, no matter what your prior knowledge of or experience with the practice.

In **Part Two: Project Forms and Templates**, we address more specifically the “how” of service learning by providing tools for designing and evaluating service learning projects with young children. **Chapter 5** includes forms and templates for introducing, brainstorming, planning, preparing, and organizing projects. **Chapter 6** provides the necessary documents to use when working with community partners. Ideas and activities for reflecting on and documenting a service learning experience are found in **Chapter 7**. And **Chapter**

8 offers several important assessment and evaluation forms to use with all project participants, both children and adults.

Part Three: Sample Lesson Plans and Resources is filled with memorable snapshots of service learning in practice. Here you will read about richly varied examples of projects that the preservice teachers in our university program have successfully completed in hundreds of early childhood classrooms throughout the Tallahassee, Florida, region. This section is organized around four themes that we have found to be particularly useful in the early grades: **Chapter 9:** Letter Writing, **Chapter 10:** Gardening, **Chapter 11:** Helping Others, and **Chapter 12:** Environmental Issues. These examples of artifacts from a range of actual projects help provide a complete ground-level view of service learning for early childhood educators. Page 162 includes a matrix listing all sample lesson plans by topic, grade level, and subject area, along with additional project ideas. Pages 205–207 include children’s book and website recommendations that correspond to the lesson plans.

Finally, **Part Four: Supporting Research and Teacher Education** discusses in more detail the theoretical support for service learning with young children (**Chapter 13**). Finally, and importantly, it discusses how to incorporate service learning into early childhood teachers’ professional development and teacher education programs (**Chapter 14**), because successful implementation of service learning projects ultimately depends on the teacher.

In addition, the **CD-ROM** includes a PowerPoint presentation that gives a comprehensive overview of the service learning process and highlights the benefits and rationales for using service learning in early childhood classrooms. It also contains all the forms and templates from the book as downloadable, customizable, and printable PDF files.

How to Use This Book

We hope this book will serve as a catalyst for you to begin using service learning. If you are a classroom teacher who is new to service learning, you may wish to read the book straight through, selecting advice, guidelines, and project examples to follow based on your individual needs. If you

have some prior experience with the practice, you can pick and choose those sections relevant to your early childhood program and make a list of new methods, ideas, and forms to try. You may also wish to share the book or specific sections of it with members of your professional learning community, if you participate in one. If you’re a teacher educator, you might want your students or participants to read selected chapters that correspond with your course or training goals and objectives. This book can serve as an additional scaffold for your students as you work with them in the area of service learning.

At a minimum, by studying the practical examples the book provides, you will see how service learning builds on children’s interests, motivation, and learning in all subject areas. These highly effective projects were all designed and implemented by novice teachers. Thus, even if you have limited experience in using a service learning approach, you can draw on a wide range of resources, including those in this book, to provide a curriculum enriched with service learning. As you begin designing your own projects, use the book’s practical, concrete suggestions for evaluating their effectiveness. Whether you are a new or an experienced teacher of young children, this guide will help you reconceptualize your curriculum to include truly meaningful learning.

Ultimately, we created this book to share our successes in developing and implementing service learning projects in early childhood classrooms. The work of the committed teachers and school leaders with whom we have partnered deserves to be recognized and celebrated. We share their stories and projects to help support educators like you who want to enrich the learning experiences of their young students. These pages are full of ideas to think about—including teachers’ stories to draw inspiration from, lesson plans and activities to implement, lists of invaluable websites and books, and other resources to turn to for information and assistance. We hope you will use this book to create and fulfill your own vision of how service learning can be used to make a difference in the lives of your students and community members alike.

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