



Ewa Dybowska

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0454-772X>

Ignatianum University in Cracow, Poland

ewa.dybowska@ignatianum.edu.pl

Service learning as an opportunity to strengthen multi-stakeholder cooperation between family, school, and community

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The aim of this article is to explore service learning methodology in cooperative partnerships between families, schools, and local communities. Accordingly, the following research question was posed: How can the service learning method support and strengthen cooperation between families, schools, and the local community?

Research methods: A desk research method was applied to both scholarly articles and project reports that use the service learning methodology.

Process of argumentation: Service learning is an educational method based on learning through experience and is applied in various areas of education. It can also be used to support multi-stakeholder cooperation among schools, families, and the community. These methods benefit students, parents, teachers, schools, and institutions operating in the local community.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: In today's context of a rapidly changing pace of life and ongoing social, cultural, and economic transformations, schools are continually seeking new forms of learning. Promoting the idea of service learning may be one way to achieve educational outcomes that meet students' needs, as learners are not only recipients of knowledge but also actively experience and apply it through their own involvement.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Service learning is successfully implemented in many countries at both the secondary school

and university levels. It benefits both learners and the local community. Further areas for the application of this method should be explored. Primary education, in particular, still seems to be an underdeveloped area for service learning. The exploration of the essence of service learning has indicated the necessity of continuing research that substantiates this approach as an effective method for cultivating communicative learning within the interactions between family, school, and community.

Introduction

The search for effective forms of learning is often a subject of reflection for both practitioners and theorists in the field of education. People learn best when they are active participants in an event or when they can acquire new knowledge and skills through direct experience. Since the time of John Dewey, learning through experience has been regarded as one of the key elements in the process of skill acquisition and human development (Dewey, 1938; Ecler-Nocoń et al., 2024; Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Today, learning through experience is implemented, among other approaches, through the idea of service learning. Service learning involves integrating learning content, instruction, reflection, and practice. Its aim is to transform social reality and to serve it in solidarity (Tapia, 2019).

Experiential learning is achieved by engaging in various forms of activity in the local environment. Participants in such activities combine working for the community with achieving learning outcomes through reflection, classroom work, discussion, and in-depth knowledge acquisition. Learning in line with the idea of service learning focuses on organizing curricula in ways that inspire students to become involved in the community (Conway, 2013).

Service learning is therefore one way in which students can apply what they learn in the curriculum to practical situations. However, it is not just a practical application of acquired knowledge. It is important that this application responds to and meets the needs of the community (Miller & Ng, 2023). This educational approach focuses on human development in all its dimensions, strengthening the empowerment of the individual

so that learners can actively contribute to building themselves and the communities in which they live (Selmo, 2018).

Today, service learning can be observed in various areas of education, in different forms and at different educational levels. It is implemented through direct participation (service learning) as well as in the form of e-service learning. This article focuses in particular on the potential application of service learning in the context of multi-stakeholder and multi-dimensional cooperation among families, schools, and local communities. Desk research method was used to review existing literature on service learning, focusing on articles that define its core principles and emphasize its role in combining both academic learning and community engagement. The method also included an analysis of results from selected projects focusing on service learning to identify results, such as student skill development and strengthened school–community partnerships.

General outline of service learning

The term *service learning* was first used in 1967 by Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey, educators involved in the Manpower Development Internship Programme in Atlanta (Stanon et al., 1999). They defined service learning as a relationship among authentic community service, conscious learning, and reflection. Service learning adds value to education because, in addition to enabling students to gain experience, it also makes a positive contribution to the community (Ecler-Nocoń et al., 2024; Stanon et al., 1999).

Service learning is also described as an experience, an educational concept, a pedagogy, a learning technique, a method, a philosophical concept, and a social movement (EOSLHE, 2020). It is an approach to teaching and learning that combines planned instruction with social activity and focuses on the educational benefits for students that arise from activities that benefit the community. Knowledge is acquired through active involvement in community life and through practical solutions to real-world problems (Brozmanová-Gregorová et al., 2024a).

Broadly speaking, service learning is an educational activity that combines knowledge acquisition, curriculum, skill development, and the fulfillment of social needs (Tapia, 2006). It therefore concerns not only students' ability to use knowledge and apply it in practice, but also ensuring that their actions benefit others and have social significance (Ecler-Nocoń et al., 2024; Gregorová et al., 2022).

The service-learning approach is based on three fundamental principles. First, it relates to social reality, i.e. it addresses the needs of a specific community. Second, the service learning method requires sufficient space and time for reflection, which enables connections to be made between the experience gained and the curriculum content. Reflection is an essential component of experiential learning. Third, the essence of service learning is characterized by reciprocity: participants in the process, both students and community partners, learn from one another by responding to each other's needs (Baumgartner et al., 2020; Brozmanová-Gregorová et al., 2024a; Gierszewski, 2023; Godfrey et al., 2005). This means that activities undertaken as part of community service not only contribute to solving community problems but also enhance the quality of learning (Tapia, 2019).

Service learning pedagogy is similar to other prosocial activities, such as: (1) fieldwork aimed at applying specific school or university knowledge in the local environment, for example through periodic work placements; (2) occasional, unsystematic solidarity initiatives that are not directly related to knowledge acquired at school or university; and (3) institutional community service through volunteering or partnership-based projects (Biela et al., 2021; Tapia, 2006, pp. 45–49).

To fully understand service learning, we should not equate it with internships or volunteering. Service learning is not volunteering because it is directly connected to school or university learning and therefore to the curriculum. Nor is service learning an internship, since during an internship the student is the main beneficiary of the activity. Service learning is more than a traditional educational activity, which is characterized by the transmission of knowledge during instruction (Brozmanová-Gregorová et al., 2024; Furco, 1996). What distinguishes service learning

is the creation of space for students, teachers, and community partners to reflect on their mutual interactions and activities in relation to educational and social goals (Flecky, 2011).

Cooperation between the family, school, and community

Rapid social, cultural, and economic changes make it increasingly difficult for individual actors in education to function independently. It therefore seems necessary to establish cooperation not only between families and schools, but also with the community. Isolating the school from the rest of the community is not conducive to achieving educational goals (Błasiak & Michalec-Jękot, 2024; Dorczak, 2012). Effective cooperation among families, schools, and the local community should be based on dialogue, shared goals and values, mutual interdependence, and benefits for all parties involved. Creating a positive climate based on kindness and respect depends on relationships among teachers and students, among school staff, between teachers and parents, and between school staff and the community (Błasiak & Michalec-Jękot, 2024; Mendel, 2000).

One model of family–school collaboration is Joyce Epstein’s model, which identifies six types of relationships between schools and families: (1) parenting; (2) communicating; (3) volunteering; (4) learning at home; (5) decision-making; and (6) collaborating with communities (Epstein et al., 2018). This model is successfully used in schools that seek to develop effective family–school partnerships. The sixth type of involvement specifically refers to cooperation with the local community and involves integrating the resources of various institutions to strengthen school programs, family functioning, and students’ learning and development. This approach allows for the optimal use of resources surrounding the school and the family, while also making the learning process more engaging. At the same time, the activities of schools, parents, and students can enrich the work of other institutions (Dybowska, 2024; Epstein et al., 2018).

Cooperation between schools and families is an important reference point for shaping and developing students’ skills, particularly social and

interpersonal competences. Multi-stakeholder cooperation among families, schools, and local communities enables mutual support and assistance (Błasiak, 2017). Partnership and involvement of families and the local community are important elements of good school organization and contribute to the achievement of key goals related to student learning and development (Epstein, 2019). Today, education increasingly takes place in the context of lifelong learning and should be characterized by multidimensionality, covering various aspects of reality. It is also clearly beneficial for education to be interactive, integrating individual development with the development of society. Education should fulfill specific functions: promoting democracy, civic engagement, multicultural awareness, critical analysis and evaluation of information, the ability to cope in the labor market, and active participation in shaping social reality.

Accordingly, one of the school's important tasks is to stay open to local issues, cooperate with other educational institutions, organizations, and private individuals, and interact actively and consistently with the local community (Błasiak & Michalec-Jękot, 2024). From this perspective, service learning can become a method that not only supports learners' development but also benefits the local community.

Service learning: Selected implications for practice

Families, schools, and local communities all play significant roles in students' education, development, and well-being. Local communities offer many resources—human, economic, material, and social—that can support and enrich activities undertaken at home and at school to promote children's learning and development (Epstein et al., 2018). Cooperation with the local community allows schools to take advantage of resources that they do not possess themselves. In this way, schools expand their social capital, provide students with access to new sources of experience, and enable them to acquire new knowledge.

Cooperation between teachers and parents is a natural part of school functioning. Extending this cooperation to include the surrounding local

environment creates space for building a strong local community. Participants in such cooperation have the opportunity to get to know one another and recognize each other's resources (Hajduk, 2018). The idea of service learning can be one way to build a local community, particularly because it benefits all participants involved in the activities undertaken.

Service learning is usually organized according to the PARE model (Preparation, Action, Reflection, and Evaluation). Preparing all partners for service learning experiences increases the likelihood of positive outcomes for both students and the community. At the core of this approach is action that allows all parties involved to experience tangible, even if modest, change. Reflection is an important element of service learning and distinguishes it from traditional volunteering or community service. Evaluation is also important in order to assess the impact of the activities on both participating students and the local community (Baumgartner et al., 2020). This is a characteristic dynamic of service learning project organization.

Several key components are important when planning service learning activities. Learning is designed and organized so that experiences gained through service respond to social needs and are based on students' active participation. Service learning is intentionally and purposefully integrated into the curriculum, which means that the activities undertaken are directly linked to learning goals and content. It is also necessary to allocate time for reflection on the experiences gained through these activities. The overall aim of service learning is to develop students' civic responsibility (Brozmanová-Gregorová et al., 2024a).

Planning service learning within the framework of cooperation among families, schools, and the local community requires finding appropriate partners for cooperation. Participants in such multi-stakeholder cooperation may include local government bodies, other educational institutions, law enforcement agencies, social welfare institutions, cultural organizations, sports clubs and facilities, churches and religious associations, businesses, non-governmental organizations, fire departments and other emergency services, health care providers, and the media (Epstein et al., 2018; Hernik et al., 2012).

The implementation of service learning projects involving partnerships among families, schools, and communities requires, first and foremost, an assessment of community needs that also takes learning content and educational objectives into account. The school is typically responsible for coordinating activities, which are led by a coordinator appointed by the school principal. In addition to determining the needs that the project is intended to address, it is also necessary to assess the resources – physical, human, and social capital – of each actor involved in the project.

Once the expectations of all participating entities have been identified, the benefits and gains of cooperation within the project are clarified. Communication channels among stakeholders and rules for cooperation are also established. After the activities have been planned and implemented, the project is evaluated. Evaluating service learning projects can help identify areas for improvement in the learning process while taking social needs and contexts into account. Evaluation is essential for recognizing the mutual benefits of experiential learning and for contributing to more sustainable outcomes and the development of future service learning initiatives (Brozmanová-Gregorová et al., 2024b).

Conclusion

María Nieves Tapia (2019) notes that service learning is used to provide real support to society, despite the limited availability of specialist terminology and bibliography on “learning through service.” One of the most important goals of learning through engagement is to strengthen local democracy and support the development of civil society. Learners acquire practical skills and develop a sense of social responsibility. Another aim of experiential learning is to transform the culture of learning itself. In this approach, learners independently plan their activities, assess opportunities for involvement, discuss problems and seek effective solutions (Gierszewski, 2023). This refers to Lev S. Vygotsky's sociocultural concept, where learning takes place through social experiences, using

cultural tools and interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Service learning actively involves participants in social action and encourages ongoing reflection on oneself and one's relationship with society. It promotes an understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants. Young people and students feel empowered by planning, implementing, and evaluating their experiences under adult guidance, and gaining knowledge through service activities (Filges et al., 2022).

Numerous resources, including academic articles, projects, and non-governmental organizations—support the implementation of service learning initiatives. Examples include the Uniservitate organization (<https://www.uniservitate.org/>), the European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education (<https://www.eoslhe.eu/easlhe/>), and International Service Learning (<https://islonline.org/>). Many projects aim to promote the concept of service learning and to implement concrete activities that simultaneously teach through experience and provide tangible benefits for local communities. One such example is the international project *E-SL4EU – e-Service Learning for More Digital and Inclusive EU Higher Education Systems* (<https://e-sl4eu.us.edu.pl/en/home/>).

Schools have long been, and continue to be, one of many closely interconnected elements of the community working for the common good (Dorczak, 2012). Although awareness of these interconnections and the need for coordinated action among social institutions operating alongside schools was rather underdeveloped for many years, such awareness has become increasingly widespread in the third decade of the twenty-first century. Multi-stakeholder cooperation among schools, families, and local communities through service learning can contribute not only to the development of competencies but also to the formation of a more responsible and humanistic society.

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