

Embedding character education into an early childhood classroom through service-learning

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Abstract: The implementation of service-learning in early childhood education classrooms has not been well documented, and the links to service-learning and the potential effects on character education are scarce at best. In this paper, a service-learning pedagogy is presented as a way to enhance character through education with the youngest learners: children in an early childhood classroom. This study examines the experiences of both teachers and children in an early childhood classroom participating in the form of a service-learning pedagogy for a year, and investigates the social emotional and character development of the young children participating in the classroom. Through the implementation of service-learning in early childhood classrooms, it is possible to grow and create a generation of learners who connect academic curricula through projects that deal with real community needs. With an emphasis on building relationships and making connections, service-learning the authors suggest, is an approach that can allow teachers to maximize children's strengths, while at the same time building character and positive social and emotional traits.

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Introduction

Recent studies have highlighted the progressive use of a praxis educational model with students in higher education early childhood preparation programs in the United Kingdom (U.K.) and in the United States (U.S.) (for example, Pascal & Bertram, 2012; Winterbottom & Mazzocco, 2015). However, the implementation of service-learning in early childhood classrooms has not been well documented, and the links to this type of research and the potential impact on character education are scarce at best. Historically, service-learning has been linked to helping children connect the curriculum through projects that deal with real community needs, and with an emphasis on building relationships and making connections, allowing teachers to maximize children's strengths, which allows all learners to be successful (Lake & Winterbottom, 2010). For example, children with challenging behaviors, English language learners, and children with exceptional needs have all benefited from using a service-learning pedagogy. This study examines the experiences of both teachers and students in an early childhood classroom that used a service-learning pedagogy for a year, and investigates if the integration of this type of teaching methodology had an impact on the character development of the young students participating in the classroom.

How is Service-Learning Practiced?

A service-learning educational model is participatory, democratic, and collaborative in nature, and in early childhood is best practiced by those who are committed and close to the real world of young children and their families (Winterbottom & Mazzocco, 2015). This pedagogy is grounded in real world situations, and is carried out by practitioners, in collaboration with the community at large who have a direct and passionate investment in what is occurring inside the classroom; it is largely carried out as collaboration with people in context and not to people (Freire, 1970). Moreover, service-learning is done in the company of peers, construing the domain of education as contingent on interactions and relationships

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(Pascal & Bertram, 2012). Through action and interaction, it is the praxeology that drives the curriculum revealing underlying assumptions and helping to generate new epistemologies. Conversely, it also reveals how teachers can change their approaches to working with young children and their families.

Types of Service-Learning

In the early childhood classroom (for this study early childhood is defined as 48-60 months old), service-learning can be used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards. The components of effective service-learning include planning and preparation, action, and reflection. During these components, especially in the planning and preparation, diversity, youth voice, and collaboration should be clearly visible (Lake & Jones, 2008).

During the reflection phase of service-learning the students are asked to incorporate multiple reflection activities (for example, through artwork, dialogue, or music) that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's connection and relationship to their community; for young children community does not have to reach outside of their classroom, it can be their immediate classroom or the school. Diversity should be incorporated through a promotion of understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants and partnerships. Moreover, it is essential that the children have a voice and collaborate to maintain a powerful/meaningful working relationship. This aligns with the United Nations Convention that children should have a voice, and should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society, but be brought up in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity (Convention of the Rights of the Child, 1989).

Finally, during the progress monitoring stage of service-learning, the students should be engaged in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals. Examples of projects that students collaborated on for this study included feeding and building shelters for animals and creating a kindness quilt to help build the school community.

Strengths and Limitations of Service-Learning

Service-learning is only one of a myriad of exemplary pedagogical approaches in early education, and has, of course, both strengths and limitations. Service-learning at its' root is focused on examining child-pedagogue community practice and exploring what works for teachers and why. This epistemology is then used to inform teaching and learning, and provides a framework for shaping future learning. To this point, a lot of the evidence that has informed practice has been imposed on the educational field from external sources (Pascal & Bertram, 2012; Winterbottom & Mazzocco, 2015) but using a service-learning approach teachers can potentially advocate change and reform from within outward.

A key strength of this approach is that those involved in practice can identify ways to improve their teaching methodology, their classroom, and their school, and take responsibility for this action, inspiring and generating collaborative learning and action. Moreover, teachers informing their practice via this paradigm can give a close account of what works, including how and why, therefore ensuring credibility and utility in the real world of practice. Finally, and critically for those who work with young children and families, it has an ethical and values transparent stance (Pascal & Bertram, 2012). Families can become engaged with their child's learning, and be a part of the school community and the wider society.

The limitations for practitioners using this pedagogical approach are also acknowledged. As in any theoretical paradigm that does not involve larger-scale interactions, it necessarily focuses on specific contexts and smaller numbers and its transferability to teacher training programs is therefore influenced by locality of context (in this case a Head Start early childhood program).

Service-learning is also not able, nor does it set out, to show any kinds of cause and effect, or to support comparisons or predictions. It takes time to build relationships with the community and with *collaborators*, which involves a deep attachment and ongoing commitment to projects that is not always possible to dedicate to the pursuit of knowledge. Therefore, because of this type of pedagogical framework, this kind of teaching methodology is sometimes seen to have less credibility and utility to guide policy

decisions due to lack of perceived rigor in method.

Character Education

The objectives of integrating character education is to create a community within a school, where faculty and staff are modeling the same moral values as the students, where all stakeholders are reflective in their practice and behavior, where caring is reciprocated between adults and children, and where all involved are working toward a common goal via organized planning (Robinson & Keckses, 2010). In this study we define character education as integrating and teaching (1) *relationship virtues*: for example, respect, fairness, civility, and tolerance (2) *performance virtues*: for example, diligence, self-discipline, effort, and perseverance, (3) or a combination of the two (Robinson & Keckses, 2010). These efforts help create a network of *pro-social relationships* among all teachers, students, parents, and administrators, in a school. In an ideal setting, the promotion of teaching character and values permeates all parts of the school, including academics, disciplinary procedures, governance, the mission, and beyond.

Examining the research literature of character education includes the seminal work of Goldstein (1999), Kohlberg (1981), and Noddings (1984). The connection between these scholars (caring, moral education, virtues) can be found in the pedagogy of service-learning in early education programs. Noddings (1984) suggests that one way for students to engage in *caring* behavior is for them to engage in consistent service activities in the school or community. The authors believe service-learning is an opportunity where students can collaborate with the community, an expectation of this work would be a true apprenticeship in caring.

The work of Goldstein (1999) examined the theories of Noddings but also Vygotsky. In this work, Goldstein espoused how Vygotsky resisted the separation of cognition and affect, emphasizing the existence of a dynamic system of meaning in which the affective and the intellectual unite and that Vygotsky himself saw affect and intellect as interconnected and inseparable.

In much of his work, Kohlberg (1981) attempted to capture and label the logic behind specific actions and virtues and thereby define one's level of moral reasoning. Such virtues as honesty, integrity, fairness, respect, and responsibility can be taught and practiced through service-learning projects. Characteristics such as character education, particularly moral reasoning, occur as a *hidden curriculum* when students unintentionally practice personal virtues through service-learning projects. It is the role of the teacher educator to expose the hidden curriculum and engage preservice teachers through discussions and actions.

Examining Character Education in Early Childhood

In early childhood classrooms, children can learn effectively via teacher modeling (Noddings, 1984). Children emulate the adults around them, so naturally this applies to doing the good along with the bad. Noddings (1984) suggests that defining what it means to care to young children is important, but what is paramount is showing "in [our] own behaviors what it means to care...[by] demonstrating caring in our relations with them" (p. 154). Brownlee et. al. (2012) also focus on the concept on rules and values with young children, as teachers discuss the importance of modeling to children.

Berkowitz and Bier (2004) discuss the necessity for positive interaction from teachers to facilitate the development of character in young children. Early childhood age children already begin to understand the concept of doing the right thing and during this period of their lives, young children are able to empathize and show concern for others well being, as well as understanding abstract concepts (Johansson et al., 2014). The ability to understand these concepts enables young children to comprehend why it is discouraged to hurt others, not include others, or be unkind. With this foundation, young students are able to see the benefit of doing well for others, as they would like to have done for themselves. In the simplest terms, and for this study teaching children to be kind to each other and those in the community defines character education in an early childhood classroom. This study seeks to enrich early childhood classrooms with service-learning to build upon skills taught within character education.

Methodology

The theoretical perspective that drove this study is derived from a theory of praxeology. A Praxeological-learning theory adheres that learners produce knowledge, and teachers should empower them to seek social transformation through constructing and finding ways to solve problems using their own comprehension (Pascal & Bertram, 2012). A Praxeological-learning theory involves and is contextualized by the smaller group and the larger; rooted in the early work of Dewey (1916), Piaget (1954) and later by Wenger (1998) praxeological-learning theory is always situated within a specific context and so embraces localism but it is also democratic and participatory in the wider sense of society.

Participants

Using a mixed-methodology, specifically semi-structured interviews, observation, artifacts (qualitative), and examining student social/emotional development this case study focused on children and participating children and teachers attending a Head Start early childhood program in Midwestern United States. This Head Start has been in operation for over 30 years, and was originally built with the dual purpose of serving the child care needs of children, staff, and faculty from the university associated with the program. However, the early childhood program enrolls children from 6 weeks of age through kindergarten from members of the community as well as university children and provides family support, guidance, and education to the community. The preschool is operational for 11 hours a day, and is licensed by the State Department of Job and Family Services as well as being accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

The preschool has a diversified, well-trained staff selected for their ability to nurture and provide educational experiences for young children and provide support to families. Enrollment is conducted by a member of the family service team, who remain accessible as a resource and support to families. Each classroom has two full-time caregivers/teachers, one of whom is the primary caregiver to each child. Eighteen young children participated in this study and 2 full time teachers. The participants' ages in this study ranged from 48 months to 60 months.

Permission and Ethics

After receiving permission from the university's Office of Research Compliance (ORC), an email was sent to the director/owner of the preschool to ascertain permission from teachers, parents, and finally verbal consent from the children to participate in the study. Once permission was granted from all participants in the study, all observation, artifact collection and interviews could begin to occur, and data was collected by the authors. Pseudonyms have been given to both students and teachers to provide anonymity.

The initial design of the project, permission was granted by the university's institute review board (IRB), and as would be expected, careful reference was made to ethical guidelines (British Education Research Association [BERA], 2004). Moreover, to consider the balance and harm and effect on the children, confidentiality and issues of informed consent were taken into consideration (Alderson, 1995). Reference was also made to the principles and ethical guidelines developed by the National Children's Bureau (2002, 2003) applying particularly to research with children.

Implementation

In the summer, during pre-service training, the participating teachers and administrators attended a two-day workshop (author instructed workshop) on what service-learning is, integrating service-learning into existing teaching strategies, and ways to implement this type of pedagogy in an early childhood classroom while not distracting away from the ongoing curriculum. From the fall, the participants integrated service-learning with the children in their classrooms to implement the strategies learnt in the training (a graduate student familiar with service-learning was assigned to provide support and assistance to the teachers throughout the year as needed).

To begin the service-learning projects, the teachers read books and topics that were familiar to the children (recycling, animal habitats) and started to discuss and plan possible service-learning projects that

they could all do together. Ultimately, the children decided on 1. Building habitats for the local wildlife (Bird houses for the Owls) and 2. Creating a kindness quilt for their peers in the school to create a school community, where each class could contribute and students could use to make them feel better if they were feeling sad, upset, or lonely.

At the beginning of the fall semester and at the end of the spring semester each participating child was assessed (using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire social/emotional development). As well as the qualitative artifacts, these results were also analyzed to see if the service-learning pedagogy had a positive impact on the children. Moreover, the children were asked 5 semi-structured interview questions to ascertain their involvement in the projects. The teachers completed a survey to discover if they believed the service-learning pedagogy made a difference.

Data Collection and Analysis

As part of the first round of data analysis, the raw field notes were coded and conclusions were initially drawn from the data (Miles et al., 2014). A sequential analysis was further implemented to ensure a more robust set of findings. In this study, field notes were recorded during the interviews with the children and analysis of the artifacts created by the children. The data notes and field notes were then read and re-read before being coded descriptively, by topic, and finally analytically (Winterbottom, 2012); memos were developed and tentative trends emerged from the data. To ensure a reliable interpretation of the data the author checked the data and findings independently with a graduate student. The findings were then integrated with the theoretical constructs and the literature. Data obtained from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and subsequently analyzed. The interviews were read and reread several times and memos were written while reading through the transcripts. Specifically, each participant's transcript, phrases, words, thoughts, feelings, or patterns that were common or repeated were circled and highlighted to ascertain if there were any relationships across the data (Bowen, 2009). The semi-structured interview questions provided the initial codes, which were then merged into common themes.

After coding, sets of transcripts were compared by the author to ensure dependability and reliability of the data. For example, children's experiences in the classroom environment were an initial code, as was community engagement. Once the initial relationships were established, the researcher made quality checks throughout the course of the study, including coding checks, checking for bias, and participant knowledgeability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To test the dependability of the data collection and data interpretation we also used member-check and peer debriefing to test the reliability of our data collection and data interpretation.

Findings and Discussion

Through recording of interviews and subsequent transcription, we found common themes within the children's responses to interview questions. The interviewer asked the children the same questions: explain the service-learning project, how it helped others, what they learned from the project, and things they have done to be helpful. The following themes of positive words, positive deeds, positive feelings, and off-topic responses were used to code responses.

Positive Words

In keeping with the work of Robinson and Keckses (2010), we defined character education as integrating *relationship virtues* and *performance virtues* within the pedagogy. As the teachers integrated praxeological-learning into their classrooms the goal of character education was to create a community within a school, where the faculty and staff model positive virtues and moral characteristics. For example, when discussing positive attributes because of the projects Charles responded by saying,

I'm kind to my brother and share my toys and when my brother asked me can yeah he can and he watched tv and see what i went um pick and he said i wanna and he said i wanna watch scooby-doo that way and then be kind.

During the interview process, when asked what they had been doing through the school year, the children responded using positive libretti. For example, when the interviewers asked the students to

describe what they thought of the service-learning they said that it was “good,” and that they enjoyed being “kind.” (See table for examples) The students also answered with using kindhearted words when speaking to others, when asked how the project was helpful. This suggested that the children understood (even at a young age) that when we are being kind to others, it is important to use positive words, instead of words that would hurt others’ feelings (For example, the students indicated during the interviews that they should “not call names” and that it wasn’t nice to “say potty words”). These actions from the children were apparent when they made the decision to build houses for the wildlife close to the child development center so they had a place to shelter. The children worked together to create the habitats, and then spoke shortly after the activities how it affected them. For example, Gavin described how he started to include the other children in the classroom in his play,

I’ll be kind how do you be kind; um play with wheels and carter yeah finn. You’re spider-man and I tell you you’re iron man then then I took care of your captain america I told audrey you’re batman girl, then, I told um johnny her supergirl, now I told Mia - batman.

These characteristics are generated from both the teachers as well as being active participants in the projects that they worked on. As indicated by Noddings (1984), instructors of young children play a larger role in character education by being the example in what they say and do in the children’s presence.

Positive Deeds

In this early childhood development stage, the children are already beginning to understand the concept of doing the right thing and during this period of their lives, they are able to empathize and show concern for others well being, as well as understanding abstract concepts (Johansson et al., 2014). The ability to understand these types of concepts enables these students to comprehend why it is discouraged to hurt others, not include others, or be unkind. For example, while building the habitats the children understood that the goal was to make the animals safe, in turn they reflected on their own actions in the classroom. Amanda stated this well when she said,

“...like when you help someone um you get calmed down and you help someone kind but first when you do something that’s angry and you’ve hurt someone and you have to calm your body down slowly and you have to say kind words to them.”

With this foundation, young students are able to see the benefit of doing well for others; In the simplest terms, teaching children to be kind to each other and those in the community defines character education in early childhood classrooms. One of the major themes emanating in this study highlighted the students wanting or learning to do good deeds, or “do good” for others. When the students were asked, “How did the project help other people?” many responded with answers relating to kindness or “being kind.” Other participants acknowledged sharing or helping others in their responses. When asked how the kindness quilt project helped others, one child responded, “trying to share with all the friends...I shared.” A majority of the children responded with “being kind,” when asked how they helped others, or explained how they helped a peer or caring adult; “I helped [Charlotte] write her name.” Some children described “good deeds” as the opposite of actions that could hurt others, such as “no punching and no kicking,” or described the importance of including others in play, with one child’s response “play with [Connor]” Through these responses, we have inferred that children perceived being kind as being helpful to others, along with doing a service to help others (see Table 1 for examples). This theme aligned with the assertion of Berkowitz (2012) who explained the main influence on the development of a child’s character is how other people treat the child. In this case, the students were collaborating together and interacting with each other in a positive manner.

Positive Feelings

Students’ responses regarding character education identified positive outcomes related to time management, collaboration, and communication. Brandes and Randall (2011) reflected on how a civic responsibility can lead to a heightened self-worth. The research literature also suggests that these outcomes may be the foundation for future civic involvement. The theme of positive feelings emerged through the children’s responses when asked to describe the project, what they learned from the project or what they

had done to be helpful (highlighting the work of Brandes & Randall, 2011). For example, when asked to explain the kindness quilt project, one student described another student being happy because “we did stuff for her to be happy.” Another child, when asked what they learned from the project, described that “it feels good” when they are kind to others. A third child uses the description “it feels good when I help people because it feels like my body’s calming down.” These descriptions allow us to infer the internal effects of “doing good” for others, and how young children internalize the positive feelings received from being helpful through praxeological-learning.

We believe that when instructors in an early childhood setting introduce a service-learning pedagogy into the classrooms it can be assumed the positive benefits that align with character development will be evident, as they get older. Additionally, some of the associated benefits of introducing service-learning include academic improvements as well as pro-social values and behavior. In the quantitative analysis we focused on the participants social/emotional growth.

Table 1. Examples of the activity and the notable comments from the children

Child	Activity	Noteable Comment
Andrea	Building Habitats	I help my friends, when they fall i help them
Ariah	we joined the sunshine the sunshine room and the schools joined us joined us and what kindness crew	That from being kind of feels good
Amanda	Building Habitats	like when you help someone um you get calmed down and you help someone kind but first when you do something that's angry and you've hurt someone and you have to calm your body down slowly and you have to say kind words to them
Charles	Kindness Quilt	we're going to more kind of school because everybody's been kind now it's getting even bigger
Connor	Kindness Quilt	be good be good how do you be good; that means you be kind what do you do to be kind you actually have to share to being kind
Jack	Kindness Quilt	we don't know when we made our kindness quilt how did it help other people
Gavin	Building Habitats	i'll be kind how do you be kind; um play with wheels and carter yeah finn. You're spider-man and i tell you you're iron man then then i took care of your captain america i told audrey you're batman girl, then, i told um johnny her supergirl, now i told mia batman
Beth	Building Habitats	audrey had to make her herself happy because oh because when she has to be happy because we did stuff for her happy
Adam	Building Habitats	i say we being kind
Shauna	Kindness Quilt	to be happy and help other people

How Can Character Education Be Used in the Classroom?

Although these are simple actions for children to learn, they are demonstrating caring behaviors by acknowledging their peers and their teacher and using manners. Teachers play a large role in character education, not by teaching or telling students about what it means to care, but by being the example in what they say and do in the children’s presence.

Aside from modeling wanted behaviors, involving young children in service-learning helps instill the need for caring and citizenship. Participating in experiences where students work with an adult in their environment to complete a project to better their surroundings helps them take ownership and develop a sense of pride (Noddings, 1984). Additionally, it should be advocated for children to be involved beyond the immediate school environment and participate in service-learning in the local community. Activities such as cleaning up a park, volunteering in a homeless shelter or hospital can introduce children to places outside of their classrooms, allowing them to see how areas of the community are connected (Noddings, 1984).

By understanding what caring means, seeing it demonstrated by teachers and other adults, and then participating in service-learning projects that put caring into action, children are able to better understand the importance of being a caring citizen in the classroom and beyond. Although seemingly simple, this puts great responsibility on the caring adult in the room, the classroom teacher. Through service-learning, as demonstrated in our study, young children are able to work alongside the teacher or caring adult in the classroom. Participating in projects within the classroom and community allow young children to learn first hand while observing caring adults also working toward a common goal.

For this study, the authors believed that the purpose of character education is to educate young people about morals, values, citizenship, and doing what is virtuous (Vargas & Gonzalez-Torres, 2009). Arthur et al. (2014) defines character as, “who we are and who we become and includes, amongst other things, the virtues of responsibility, honesty, self-reliance, reliability, generosity, self-discipline, and a sense of identity and purpose.” (p. 3) It goes without argument that the qualities mentioned are those that benefit classrooms, schools, and communities when embodied by young children.

In this study, we wanted to specifically determine the function and suitability of service-learning as a suitable pedagogy for enhancing character through education with the youngest learners: students in an early childhood classroom. Through examining the development of character in a character education program we needed to define what character education looked like in early childhood, how it is taught, the role of moral education, its effect on how children develop, and the benefits of having character education in early childhood.

Further Discussion

Through the use of a pedagogical element of praxeological-learning, the participants in this study were engaged in a service-learning classroom. The research goal of the study was to specifically determine the function and suitability of service-learning as a suitable pedagogy for enhancing character through education students in an early childhood classroom. Through examining the development of character in a character education program defined what character education looked like in early childhood, how it is taught, the role of moral education, its effect on how children develop, and the benefits of having character education in early childhood. Using the recordings of interviews and subsequent transcriptions, the authors found common themes within the children’s responses to interview questions: positive words, positive deeds, and positive feelings.

Historically, researchers of early childhood have often debated how character education should be integrated in their classrooms (Lake & Winterbottom, 2010), and as a result it has not been an integral concept. Similarly to the work of Berkowitz (2012), we believe that character education should be defined as educating children and helping to make informed decisions on how to make the correct or incorrect choice at any given moment. To be able to do this, the teacher should foster the ability to choose to do the *right thing* by engaging the learner in meaningful experiences. Integrating academic content while working in real world situations, and carried out by practitioners, in conjunction with the community at large who will have a direct and passionate investment in what is occurring inside the classroom and in society is a potential way to build character development that is missing in a lot of schools today.

In this project, the teachers, children, and the community worked on providing habitats for the local wildlife, while at the same time creating a kindness quilt for the other students in the school. Through teaching respect (for the environment we live in), civility and tolerance (collaborating with each other) *relationship virtues* espoused by Robinson and Keckses (2010) were integrated into the classroom. Moreover, diligence (learning how to build, creating a habitat), self-discipline and effort were also developed (performance virtues). If the goal of character education is to create a community within a school, then the use of service-learning is a vehicle where faculty and staff can model these moral values and can work toward a common goal with the community through collaboration and interaction (Robinson & Keckses, 2010). It is our belief that through these efforts we can help create a network of positive relationships among the community and all teachers, students, parents, and administrators.

Concluding Thoughts

As the education system in the US continues to head towards accountability and even higher stakes testing, it is important to remember the building blocks of society: young children. This study examined the experiences of both teachers and children in an early childhood classroom that used a service-learning pedagogy for a year, and investigated the social emotional and character development of the young students participating in the classroom. The authors believe that through the implementation of service-learning in early childhood classrooms society, and through small community collaborations we can grow and create a generation of students who connect academic curricula through projects that deal with real community needs. With an emphasis on building relationships and making connections, service-learning is an approach that can allow teachers to maximize children's strengths, which allows all learners to be successful, while at the same time building character and positive social and emotional traits.

Limitations of the Study

A possible limitation of this study is the relatively small number of students participating in the cohort, although the findings from our study have clear implications for teacher education programs. Working with a school district and classroom teachers presents challenges. Early childhood pedagogues, who do not understand that service-learning teaches and/or reinforces curriculum standards, will sometimes construe this type of learning as non-academic or merely fun-based. Therefore, sharing the impact of praxeological-learning in conjunction with academic goals will help to convince districts, schools, and teachers that this type of education belongs in their educational setting. It is our hope that in their future classrooms, the teachers match the service-learning strategies to the developmental needs of their students.

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