

Service Learning in Afterschool

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Abstract: The afterschool setting can serve as an important arena for service learning activities. Service learning projects can help afterschool students with learning, social responsibility, and character development. This article provides an overview of planning considerations for service learning in afterschool. The article also provides guidance for afterschool teachers and administrators in seeking service learning resources.

Introduction

Afterschool teachers and administrators should provide service learning opportunities for students in afterschool programs. Service learning combines community outreach or service with various academic components, such as reflection opportunities and collaboration (Chapin, 2009; Gent, 2009; Kaye, 2010). Students in the afterschool population can benefit from service learning initiatives. With service learning, students take an active approach to using subject area knowledge to improve their communities, grow in understanding, develop character, and demonstrate abilities (Kaye, 2010). Service learning projects can play a large role in the character development and academic development of afterschool students. Service learning enhances student learning, especially in developing student leadership, civic knowledge, responsibility, etc. (Gent, 2009; Parker, 2012).

The purpose of this article is to discuss some considerations for service learning in the afterschool setting. Service-learning opportunities should be carefully selected and planned in the afterschool setting with consideration to diversity in structure, and variety in locations

(Dryfoos, 1999; Ross & Mathison, 2008). Based on the diverse settings, the service learning must be customized to the site needs and the student needs. In order to effectively foster youth engagement, it is important for teachers and administrators to consider local needs, local culture, and local priorities in program development (Campbell-Patton & Patton, 2010). Although afterschool programs differ, there are planning approaches and resources that can benefit afterschool students.

Planning Service Learning in Afterschool

Service learning efforts in afterschool should complement and/or extend the school day instruction in a positive manner. Although instruction is important, afterschool administrators and teachers need to beware of replicating the exact school day experience. As noted by Honig and McDonald (2005), there can be negative impacts if afterschool programs are too similar to school-day instruction, since some students in afterschool may struggle in the regular school day environment. Students benefit from critical thinking and reflection in tasks, teacher leadership, and an open classroom climate (Kaye, 2010). These best practices should be applied to the afterschool service learning experience.

The social and emotional aspects of the service-learning project are essential planning considerations, in addition to the academic aspects (Gent, 2009). Civic engagement and service learning can be examined from a Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective; this perspective includes a focus on competence, confidence, character, connection, and contribution (Lerner, 2004; Sherrod, 2007, p. 60; Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007). These important social and emotional aspects must be discussed in all stages of afterschool service learning projects.

Strong academic knowledge enhances service learning education efforts. Afterschool service learning projects should be customized and age-appropriate. Afterschool administrators and teachers should set clear goals for the afterschool students' service learning assessments. In order to establish service learning clear goals, standards-based objectives, curriculum goals, and goals for IEPs are important (Gent, 2009). Planning efforts can begin with a careful inventory of the school standards related to the service learning initiative. Standards assessment is important for curriculum planning; it helps teachers and administrators to assess potential academic training and preparation needs (Chapin, 2009). By setting clear goals and examining the standards, the objectives, assessments and content can be planned effectively (Billig, 2007). Linking the service learning activity to the academic curriculum also helps students to understand the goals for overall mastery (Billig, 2007).

Service Learning Projects

Afterschool teachers and administrators benefit from a realistic time/cost analysis for service learning activities. Billig (2007) detailed how time is an important factor, as service learning projects need adequate time for long-term impact, student character development, and student academic achievement. Therefore, the service learning initiative must be scaled to the available time in the afterschool program and the purpose for the students. There are a myriad of options with different time requirements for afterschool service learning activities. Chapin (2009) noted a variety of projects, such as the following: tutoring projects, writing letters to government officials, working on community history projects, solving site problems, etc. (pp. 244-246). Kaye (2010) also described various options for service learning. In direct service

activities, the students have direct involvement with the recipients and the activities have an impact on the recipients. An example of a direct service activity is having students work with a population with a certain specified need, such as cleaning up a location for town residents. As Kaye (2010) noted with indirect service projects, students contribute to service efforts; however, direct recipient outreach is not a required component. One example of an indirect service project might include collecting resources (such as household supplies) for recipients that are in need. Kaye (2010) presented advocacy projects for another category of service learning. With the advocacy project approach, students gain awareness of an issue or promote a course of action on an issue. For example, writing letters to government officials about a particular service issue contributes to student service learning advocacy efforts. Research-based service activities are another approach, according to Kaye (2010). Under this approach, students can take part in locating and reporting information on a selected study topic. The students may even research formal surveys and evaluations, or develop new ones. For example, students may conduct research and service for community environmental or social issues. Based on the afterschool program's capacity and resources, the various service learning approaches and activities that Chapin and Kaye described can be scaled down or combined for more extensive projects.

Afterschool programs present unique opportunities for additional service learning activities, since it may be difficult to conduct service learning during the school day (Afterschool Alliance, 2011). Afterschool programs are organized in different ways, with varying schedules. Depending on the goals of the afterschool program, the instructional time may be more flexible than in the school setting. Therefore, there is potential for extending learning time in various ways (Ross & Mathison, 2008). As one method, afterschool teachers and administrators may choose a problem-based learning approach for service learning. With a problem-based learning approach, students learn about an issue of concern; then, the students use reasoning, research, and action to examine the issue and brainstorm solutions (Whitfield, 1999). In this problem-based approach, afterschool teachers and administrators serve as service learning facilitators for the afterschool students. The afterschool students take the lead in executing the terms of the afterschool service project.

Civic Education

With the flexible structure in many afterschool programs, there may be more time for extended instruction on local civic education. Local civic education supports afterschool service learning efforts. Shields (1999) discussed activities that promote awareness of local civic education. As noted by Shields (1999), such activities include specific local instruction on the community history, current services, current agencies, local government structure, local organizations, and local government representatives. Local current events and elections can also serve as special topics. Community representatives and leaders may also support service learning efforts, by providing avenues for service, providing guest speakers, providing mentors, etc. (Gent, 2009). This approach to instruction will enhance the students' civic knowledge base, which is important for service learning (Gent, 2009; Shields, 1999).

Planning Projects

Service learning efforts benefit from perspectives and input. It is important to gather input from all of the stakeholders in the service learning activity which can influence future service learning efforts (Flinders, Nicholson, Carlascio, & Glib, 2013). Input can be gathered in many forms, using surveys, discussions, reflection assignments, etc. Afterschool students especially

need to have a voice in the activities and plans for the site. This approach gives the afterschool students the opportunity to provide their thoughts, feelings, and expectations about service learning initiatives, which helps with acceptance and participation in service learning. Allowing students to choose and design the service learning experience helps with their interest and enthusiasm (Billig, 2007; Kaye, 2010).

For afterschool service learning activities, assessment is essential. It is important to use multiple methods of assessment, and these should be incorporated with ongoing project monitoring (Billig, 2007; Gent, 2009). In planning for assessments, it is important to note that the reflective process is essential for service learning (Billig, 2007; Gent, 2009). Therefore, any assessment system must incorporate frequent reflection-based assignments, even in the afterschool setting. These reflection based assignments should incorporate character and emotional prompts, for student self-examination. Student assessment results also provide information to help future service learning efforts (Gent, 2009).

Seeking Service Learning Resources

Afterschool programs may benefit from partnerships for service learning project coordination. College or university partnerships, school partnerships, or organization partnerships can also yield valuable information to enhance service learning efforts (Billig, 2007; Gent, 2009). For example, college and university students may provide valuable social studies activities and instruction for afterschool students (Gieselmann, 2008). The students benefit from an integrated service learning approach that supplements their school-day instruction (Billig, 2007). Some afterschool programs are linked to one or more schools. In those cases, afterschool administrators can meet with school officials to discuss specific service learning resources and approaches. Afterschool program teachers and directors help student academic skills by aligning afterschool programming with the school day curriculum (Huang, 2001). For example, if the school has a particular character education curriculum, the afterschool program can elaborate on the character education principles via planned service learning projects.

Service learning resources are important for planning afterschool efforts. These are just a few examples of school service learning resources that can be customized to serve the needs of diverse afterschool programs. Cathryn Berger Kaye (2010) provided examples, resources, and activities for the service learning curriculum in *The Complete Guide for Service Learning: Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, and Social Action*. Pamela J. Gent (2009) discussed incorporating service learning into the education curriculum in *Great Ideas: Using Service Learning & Differentiated Instruction to Help Your Students Succeed*. Gent also provided information for designing, implementing, and sustaining service learning. Resources provided by social studies and service learning organizations are beneficial. They provide information that can also be used in the afterschool setting, such as professional development information. The National Youth Leadership Council has also provided varied resources for service learning; for example, the *K-12 Service Learning Standards for Quality Practice* give indicators for planning service learning programs (National Youth Leadership Council, 2008). Conferences that are sponsored by social studies and service learning professional organizations provide updated information and resources. The conference attendance time also provides a valuable retreat for afterschool planning purposes.

Additional Organizations and Websites for Service Learning Information

Corporation for National and Community Service

- <http://www.nationalservice.gov/>

National Council for the Social Studies

- <http://www.socialstudies.org/>

Center for Civic Education

- <http://www.civiced.org/>

Conclusion

The afterschool setting is a valuable arena for service learning and character development. Afterschool teachers and administrators can play a large role in developing service-minded citizens who actively participate in decision-making processes. Therefore, it is important to afterschool administrators and teachers to develop a systematic plan for service learning efforts. Afterschool students will benefit from participating in service learning activities in a setting that may be smaller than the typical school setting. Afterschool teachers and administrators can extend the instruction and approaches from the school setting to provide comprehensive service learning development. Providing service learning opportunities will enhance the overall character and academic education of afterschool students, especially those who are classified as at-risk students.

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