

Family Service Learning Brief

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Service-learning strategies have been widely used to enhance learning experiences of youth and young adults. Participation in these strategies often results in increased school engagement, civic participation, and leadership activities. Although service-learning undertakings have typically been carried out with school-age and college students, the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL) has developed a model that extends service-learning benefits to families. A six-step process is embedded in multi-generational educational programming and is currently being implemented through NCFL's Toyota Family Learning Program, in collaboration with 10 schools and community organizations across the United States. Our findings suggest that the Family Service Learning activities provided ample opportunities for families to improve a variety of skills: organization, research, planning, reading and writing, technology, teamwork and sharing, civic responsibility, and leadership. This brief highlights the benefits of engaging *families* in service-learning activities, offers initial findings from an independent evaluation of the model, and provides action steps for carrying out Family Service Learning activities.

Background of Service Learning

The ethic of service has been a part of America's democratic and social fabric since the country's inception. Professionals across the educational spectrum—from preschool through adult education and beyond—recognize the value of learning through hands-on experiences. The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1990 defined service learning as

“...a method (A) under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that—(i) is conducted in and meets

the needs of a community; (ii) is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program, and with the community; and...(B) that—(i) is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled; and (ii) provides structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience.”

Although this definition does not include adult basic education or family literacy as a vehicle for service learning, NCFL believed these settings would be ideal to provide traditional family literacy content while addressing community needs and engaging adult learners, their children, other family members, and community partners.

NCFL's reasoning was based on substantial evidence pointing to the promise of service learning. For example, when families participate in service together they spend quality time learning about their communities and adults act as positive role models for their children (McKaughan, 1997; Roehlkepartain, 2003). Further, the value that parents place on civic engagement and relationships within the community has been shown to transfer to the child who, in turn, reproduces values such as responsibility, empathy, and caring for others (Littlepage, 2003; Roehlkepartain, Naftali, & Musegades, 2000; Stukas, Switzer, Dew, Goycoolea, & Simmons, 1999). Student service-learning projects also may enable low-income families to build substantive connections with their community, develop a stronger sense of self-worth, experience a reduction in social isolation, and improve parenting skills (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2006).

Literature Review

There is a rich body of literature on service learning; however, for this brief we have selected literature on service learning in the English as a Second Language (ESL) context to help frame our discussion because the vast majority of Toyota Family Learning participants are English language learners (Goodling Institute, 2014). Service learning may have added benefits for non-native English speakers as participation helps them to feel less like outsiders and more accepted in the United States (Russell, 2007). The interactions they engage in may also reinforce their language skills (Russell, 2007). At one university where ESL students experienced service learning as part of their curriculum, students' journal comments reflected that the service-learning activities helped them to develop language skills, feel more a part of the community, and expand their global perspective of caring (Minor, 2001). Adults have been found to receive direct benefits, such as improved interpersonal skills, increased civic participation, improved mental health, and improved health outcomes from service learning (Grimm, Spring, & Dietz, 2007; Wilson & Musick, 2000).

Although there is substantial research on service learning in a college or a K-12 school age setting there is little, if any, research on service learning in the adult basic education, family literacy, or early learning setting. However, there is literature that offers a base to argue for embedding service learning as a component of family literacy. It is well documented that engaging families in the educational process can yield compounding benefits for generations to come (Hattie, 2009; Ferguson, 2008; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Benefits include developing voice (Morgan & Streb, 2001), becoming involved in local institutions and gaining experience working with community members, and attending to local and global issues (Roehlkepartain, 2009). It is also feasible that service-learning experiences can enhance parents' self-efficacy, expand social networks, build literacy and work-based skills, as well as support parents to more effectively advocate for their family and community.

Service learning may be particularly important for families at risk. For example, the opportunity for marginalized populations to develop and express voice, a best practice recommendation for service-

learning projects (Morgan & Streb, 2001), may give way to future leadership opportunities, civic engagement, and the capacity to more effectively advocate for children's and families' needs in schools and communities. Furthermore, developing literacy and technology skills, content knowledge, and expanded social capital can offer immigrant and poor families the possibility to feel more self-efficacious and experts in their own right (Millar & Kilpatrick, 2005; Toso, Prins, Drayton, Gnanadass, & Gungor, 2009). Lastly, service-learning projects could assist individuals to build social networks and expand access to needed resources and information (Small, 2009). Drawing on a broader set of related literature helps support the usefulness of conducting service learning with participants enrolled in family literacy programs with an end goal of building more resilient families and stronger communities.

A Multi-Generational Theory of Change: Family Service Learning

In 2013, the first five Toyota Family Learning grantees incorporated a Family Service Learning component into their family literacy programming. With the goal of engaging parents in their community and children's schooling through service learning, participating adults used problem-solving and critical-thinking skills to address participant-identified issues. Children worked with their parents to help plan and carry out the service-learning projects to tackle the identified issues. Other family members, friends, and community members were welcomed to participate in aspects of the projects.

Through this innovative Family Service Learning approach, NCFL seeks to support parents' inclusion in local communities and children's long-term civic engagement. By combining the power of multi-generational involvement with the democratic nature of service learning, stronger and more self-sufficient families and communities can be built. Children and families are offered the opportunity to solve community issues and learn together; thereby enabling the development of 21st century life and career skills, such as flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility (Trilling & Fadel 2009).

The NCFL Family Service Learning Model

NCFL developed a six-step model based on the work of Roehlkepartain (2009) that incorporates content learning, technology, and problem solving and is designed to link to 21st century college and career readiness skills. NCFL identifies its Family Service Learning strategy as a form of Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time[®] and a multi-generational approach to learning that involves parents, children, caregivers, and extended family members in reciprocal learning in both physical and digital environments. PACT Time[®] is a deliberate attempt to structure family learning using the five components of an effective parent and child experience: (1) planning, (2) preparation, (3) experience, (4) debriefing, and (5) transfer to home, community, and school (Jacobs, 2004). PACT Time activities include families coming together to work, play, read, learn, engage in interactive media experiences, and/or volunteer. The five components of PACT Time align closely with the six steps of service learning (see below) to build a service-learning experience that is accessible and grounded in family engagement and family literacy research.

NCFL designed the model so that each of the six steps can be carried out as a PACT Time experience. NCFL adapted seven identified indicators to engage participants and foster learning—meaningful service, links to curriculum, reflection, diversity, voice, partnerships, and duration and intensity (RMC, 2008)—and wove them into the model to fit the unique needs of Family Service Learning.

NCFL Family Service Learning: Six-Step Process

1. *Investigation:* Parents and children investigate community problems that they might potentially address. Investigation involves research and a community mapping activity.
2. *Planning and preparation:* Parents, children, community members, and teachers learn about and plan the service activities. This step includes acquiring content knowledge and addressing the administrative issues needed for a successful project.
3. *Action (implementing the service activity):* Parents, children, community members, and teachers carry out and complete the Family Service Learning project.
4. *Reflection:* Parents and children debrief and reflect on the service-learning experience. Activities include thinking about the project implementation, the meaning and connection between parents' work and the community, and what children have learned in school.
5. *Demonstration of results and celebration:* Families, program staff, community participants, and others publicly share what they have achieved and learned.
6. *Sustainability:* Parents and program staff plan how to make their project or Family Service Learning an ongoing endeavor. This



may include strengthening or cementing partnerships, generating and leveraging resources, and identifying and securing funding sources that are available over time. Through this process, Family Service Learning can become integrated into the culture and goals of the family literacy program.

NCFL Family Service Learning Evaluation Findings

The NCFL Family Service Learning model combines family learning with service learning in an effort to build stronger communities. Ten sites across the U.S. are currently implementing this model, and five more sites will be added in the next funding year. The Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy is conducting a formative evaluation that has provided evidence that Family Service Learning can indeed engage families in building content knowledge, work-based skills, leadership skills, and in increasing self-efficacy and social networks. The potential to support social capital through service-learning projects as families work with community leaders and institutions also was evident.

A series of data collection tools (interviews, surveys, logs, site visits, artifacts, and focus groups) were used to understand and document how grantees implemented this new model for families learning together. The analysis provided some promising findings that support the development of outcomes for parents, such as increased employability skills (e.g. planning, teamwork, using technology), expanded voice and sense of self-efficacy, and some aspects of leadership development. There is also some evidence that participants expanded their social networks through service-learning activities.

The logs indicated that the service-learning projects engaged 526 parents/guardians, 94 children, and 178 other family members or adults in nine service-learning projects across five sites. There was great variety among the projects: water consumption to improve health, canned goods drive, community clean-up (Earth Day), reading kits for local families, decorating the computer lab and parent center, library event, refugee donation, hygiene kits for the homeless, and homelessness awareness.

Expanded Voice, Social Capital and Networks

A key benefit for parents falls in the categories of social capital and voice as parents reached beyond their own immediate social circle to address needs and plan the Family Service Learning project. Participants noted, “We asked for aid from CVS and 99 cents to help,” and “We wrote one letter asking for donations from Home Depot.” Communication and social development skills, the ability to present to community leaders, and interactions with people outside participants’ social networks were fostered through the Family Service Learning project. Parents also mentioned the social contacts they made within their classes. Parents enrolled at the Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island identified the following benefits: “Know more people. Fellowship. Talking with more people.” This is important because expanded networks provide marginalized parents social support (Belle, 1982) and access to resources and institutions from which they are traditionally excluded (Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; Ishimaru, 2014).

Parents grew more confident in advocating for their projects:

We wrote letters to our councilman for several large trash containers.

Expanded Self-Efficacy and Self-Confidence

Pride, self-confidence and self-efficacy were cultivated as parents realized that they could provide their children with a sense of worth. Self-efficacy, the self-perception of the ability to achieve one’s goal, plays a key role in assisting adults to realize their goals (Bandura, 1982). Logs and interviews indicated that providing support to one’s community (e.g., helping others, making the community a better place to live) helped demonstrate to participants that they had something of value to give to others. For example, a participant from the East Side House program in the Bronx reported that her daughter learned that her

family, although poor, had something of value to give to other families in the community. This offered both the child and the mother a sense of importance and relevance to their community. Participants also grew more confident in their knowledge and ability to take on and complete projects that required language, literacy, technology, and community interactions—key skills that help to build self-confidence, self-efficacy, and knowledge of community institutions and people.

Findings indicate that service-learning activities supported and enhanced personal traits that assisted parents in advocating for and persisting in achieving their goals. Participants described how working as a group was a great benefit to themselves and to the community: *“The parents determined that we would like to spruce up the park so that children could play in warm weather.”* Additionally, participation helped to develop family and intergenerational unity.

Parents stated that they were transmitting ideas of service to their children:

The children learned the importance of maintaining our clean beach with us parents. We collected more than 20 bags of garbage. We want to involve other people to learn what we have learned.

Increased Content Knowledge

Families learned research skills, built academic skills, and gained content knowledge while planning and carrying out the service-learning projects. Across programs, learners developed skills when conducting community inquiries to identify issues or find information on the Internet to learn about issues such as the health benefits of drinking plenty of water. At the Toberman program in San Pedro, parents and children talked to the local homeless shelter staff, did research online, and watched and interviewed the director of a documentary about homeless populations to better understand the key items to include in a kit for the local homeless population.

Participants enrolled in Toyota Family Learning were mostly immigrant learners. Accordingly, the primary goal participants identified during intake interviews was to improve their language. In the exit interview, participants rated language development, along with gaining parenting skills, as the goals most frequently met.

Increased Use of Technology Skills

An important aspect of the Family Service Learning model is to embed technology in program services. Programs integrated technology into the projects in several ways. Houston Public Library parents created a social media competition using Facebook; one parent reported, *“I re-sent the image of the importance of water to some friends and family and asked them to forward the message.”* Toberman parents noted that carrying out a project enabled them to become familiar with office equipment. In addition to developing computer skills, parents developed other technology skills such as using photocopiers which adult learners often do not have the opportunity to do.

Parent comments underscore engagement with technology:

We created a flyer using PowerPoint. We researched ideas to find ways to use mass media.

Increased Opportunities to Develop Work-Based Skills

Originally, we hypothesized that social capital and leadership skills may develop through participation in the Family Service Learning component; however, what was striking was that many of the skills aligned with the Office of Career Technical and Adult Education (OCTAE) Employability Skills Framework. This framework is comprised of three knowledge categories that are associated with employment:

1. Applied Knowledge (“the integration of academic knowledge and technical skills, put to practical use in the workplace,” such

as technology, office machine use, English language development);

2. Effective Relationships (“the interpersonal skills and personal qualities that enable individuals to interact effectively with clients, coworkers, and supervisors,” such as self-efficacy);
3. Workplace Skills (“the analytical and organizational skills and understandings that employees need to successfully perform work tasks,” such as effective communication, and time management) (Employability Skill Framework, n.d., para 3-6).

Participants frequently commented on the value of working as a group and opportunities to develop other organizational skills such as decision-making, problem solving, planning, delegating responsibilities, and partnering with other organizations to accomplish goals. Lincoln Public Schools’ Toyota Family Learning Program partnered with kindergarten teachers to plan and host an information night for immigrant families with children entering the school system. Parents who helped organize and attend the evening noted that they learned about planning and more about the school system; they also realized that they had a great deal of information to pass along to other parents.

Promising Practices

NCFL’s Family Service Learning projects provide evidence of the strength of the Family Service Learning concept. They offer adults and children the opportunity to engage in contextualized and project-based learning, two learning contexts that support student engagement and accelerated learning (Jobs for the Future, 2010; Purcell-Gates, Degener, & Jacobson, 1998). In addition to offering support to the community, participants developed leadership, organizational, teamwork, and social skills. They increased their confidence and felt more engaged, as a family, with the community. Engaging parents in all six steps of Family Service Learning—Investigation, Planning and Preparation, Action, Reflection, Demonstration of Results and Celebration, and Sustainability—appears to be a substantive way of supporting and expanding literacy and workplace skills, social capital and network

development, and civic engagement. Furthermore, it appears that parents continue to garner most of the same advantages from the traditional Kenan four-component family literacy model (adult literacy being the primary exception).

Participants remarked on the knowledge and skills they gained.

As we practice our own education and skills as adults and parents, we learned to communicate with other parents, people in the community, use the technology to educate us in serious global issues of pollution, and keep our beaches clean.

Recommendations

Programs reported few challenges in completing the Family Service Learning projects; however, the findings suggest that working towards more parent driven service-learning projects might result in more substantive learning experiences and richer benefits from these experiences. To work toward more parent driven service-learning projects, programs will want to consider the following:

- Involve parents more fully in the process. This may mean scaffolding and creating opportunities for parents who often do not have a voice in their communities to become comfortable expressing their opinions and taking the lead in organizing project activities. Site staff commented that parents were more or less comfortable with choosing and designing the service-learning project; however, once one project was completed and the parents were more familiar with the process, parents were more participatory in the full process.
- Embed content instruction more strongly in service-learning projects. Some service-learning projects focused more on the service aspect (i.e., doing something for someone) as opposed to having a learning component embedded

in the creation and delivery of the service project. As shown earlier, learning about a topic demonstrated to parents that they were capable of learning complex content that they were able to present to community members. These types of activities can greatly enhance self-efficacy and self-confidence in a variety of contexts while helping parents to build academic and work-based skills.

- Continue to build adult literacy skills through blended learning approaches. Because many participants had not acquired beyond a sixth-grade education, programs may want to consider including intentional literacy instruction as part of the service-learning activities.
- Continue to build technology skills. Some programs found that teaching technology or incorporating it into the service-learning activities was difficult for a number of reasons: lack of computers or other devices for participants to use, lack of space to accommodate technology experiences for all participants and their children, and a wide variance in levels of participant expertise. Programs will need support to acquire adequate resources to deliver technology instruction. Programs also need to consider how they will structure learning and technology activities so that all participants can increase their knowledge and comfort level with new programs and processes that involve using computers and the software.
- Provide opportunities for families to use other kinds of technology. As noted above, participants remarked that they gained skills using office machines. In a world where work settings include a variety of equipment, expanding the definition of technology beyond computers could be useful in developing work-based skills.
- Involve children more fully in the planning process. To capitalize on the idea of building the intergenerational outcomes of Family Service Learning, include children substantively in the research, planning, and content building aspect of the projects. This can be done by having parents and children work together on activities or using PACT Time® materials focused on the project topic.

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