



## COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING AND ITS IMPACT ON LIFE SKILL DEVELOPMENT AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY

### Education

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### ABSTRACT

Life skills are those abilities that promote mental wellbeing and competence in young people to face realities of life. Young people in the age group of 10-19 are vulnerable to various factors like risk taking behaviour, life style related health problems, etc. as an enabling factor; life skills will help them develop the concept of oneself through their interactions with their peers and society. There are different approaches and strategies to teach life skills. The most common methods that are used in the schools are through dance, art, music, debate, class discussion and brainstorming events. Life skills are taught as part of the curriculum also within the classroom. The objective of this study is to gather the literature related to community service learning and its impact on students. The methodology used for the present study is literature survey. From the readings and the other findings it is proved that there are lot of studies done on community service learning and its impact in developing various skills among adolescents. However there are no studies done to evaluate life skills among children when they are involved in community service learning.

### KEYWORDS

Community Service Learning, Life Skill Development, Self- awareness and Evaluation

### Introduction

The goal of education is not just to enable a child to acquire knowledge but also to bring out the best potentialities in her. Learning takes place everywhere and at every moment of life, but many people are not aware of the fact that learning is connected from one activity to the other which one does. The children at school find it difficult to associate one subject with the other. They see every event that happens in and around them as different or separate entity. They find it hard to connect themselves to their own life experiences, learn lessons from them and to relate them to the contextual issues that they see in their world and respond to them. All these point to the lack of life-oriented, life-empowering and life-enhancing educational system that we have today. In the present system, we have so much to do with our text books (to be learnt word by word) that we ultimately forget the context to which our education must respond. Consequently, there is less or no time that permits our children at schools to think, introspect and reflect on the conditions of their life and experience.

The ongoing tragedy in Syria and Iran that leaves humanity with a sense of hopelessness and feeling of uncertainty; the never before faced threats of global proportion such as, nuclear war, ecological disaster and its impending effect like global warming; the loss of the sense of meaning in our own values and cultures systems; why so far the utter poverty and adverse life situations that we see next to our school gate do not affect our students anymore. It has become harder for them to see this world as their common home and themselves not merely as citizens of India but belonging to a greater world at large. In this scenario, it is essentially important to teach our children at school the power of interdependence and empathy than only transmitting educational contents that lead them to get high marks and admission into professional colleges. Today, to live in harmony and integrity what one needs is a greater sense of self awareness, empathy, communication and interpersonal relationship skills. It is only these life skills taught in schools when children are still young can affect healthy signs of growth in one's personality. It is this which will invariably enhance our education system to produce effective fruits in one's life and living.

Studies show that there is significant rise in the problems faced by adolescents and one such is the serious rise of emotional disturbances (WHO, 2001). The situation prevails even now and education is not coming out with solutions to handle the emotional problem of children. One best practice model for contributing to the healthy development of adolescents is a life skill approach, which helps adolescents not only in handling their emotional issues but strengthens their abilities to understand themselves and the society in a holistic perspective. World Health Organization (WHO, 1993) defined life skills as "the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life." Life skill classes will have greater and lasting effect on the students.

Though there are many ways to teach life skill in schools, the children do learn quickly when they are exposed to experiential way of learning. A Chinese proverb best describes the ideal way of teaching life Skills – "I listen and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand." Involving students in real life activities has greater impact in their life.

National Curriculum Frame Work (GOI, 2005) pointed out that, through work one learns to find one's place in society. It further states that, work is an educational activity with an inherent potential for inclusion. Community service oriented activities as part of the curriculum will give students opportunities for the first hand life experiences. However, one need to be cautious that such a wonderful experience will remain just another activity if it is not reflected reviewed and evaluated constantly and periodically. Indeed, Socrates rightly said, "an unreflected or unexamined life is not worth living". An exercise of evaluative reflection after every experience will make children develop their skills and personalize their life in an efficient manner. It is believed that if anyone has to be trained to learn any skills, it is preferred to do it early in life. If they do not learn it early in life it will be difficult to unlearn and undo. When we can teach to write, sing and dance it is also possible to teach our children life oriented and life-centered values and goals.

### Objective

The objective of the present article is to analyze the studies on the community service learning and its impact on life skill development among school children.

### Community Service Learning

The National Policy on Education (GOI, 1968) while discussing on "Work-Experience and National Service" states that, the school and the community should be brought closer through suitable programs of mutual service and support. Work-experience and national service including participation is meaningful and challenging programs of community service and national reconstruction should accordingly become an integral part of education. The emphasis given in these programs should be on self-help, character formation and on developing a sense of social commitment. The National Policy on Education, 1986 and subsequent amendments also retained the part on work experience and National Service. This shows the importance of making it the part of the school curriculum.

In an article, "The Principals of Good Practice for combining Service and Learning," Honnett Ellen Porter & Poulsen Susan. J (1989) states that, the combination of service and learning is powerful. It creates potential benefits beyond what either service or learning can offer separately. Each principle of good practice is explained with number of good examples and is also related to programmes and polices based in all settings such as community organizations, K-12 schools, colleges and universities, corporations, government agencies, research and

policy organizations. It shows how the participants through the frequent results of the effective interplay of service and learning develop a habit of critical thinking that enable them to learn more through life. It further states that how such a combination can also motivate and strengthen one's ethics of social and civic response etc.

Herzberg Bruce (1994) article on "Community Service and Critical Teaching" explains that incorporating community service in the curriculum will not only make the individual successful, but also make them better citizens. Students those who are involved in community service report that their fears and prejudices diminish or disappear. They are moved by the experience of helping others and they feel a commitment to help more. It develops further in students a social imagination which does not stop with only asking questions but helps to analyze the world and act to transform it.

In the study on "The Theoretical Roots of Service- Learning in John Dewey: Toward a Theory of Service- Learning", Giles Jr. Dwight E & Eyer Janet (1994 ) describes the significant shifts that takes place in intellectual, personal and moral levels when there is a well-structured service-learning experience. The research finding also demonstrates the new ways of strengthening the role of service in the curriculum which will invariably enhances student learning outcomes.

O'Keefe, Joseph M. S.J (1997) in his study on "Children and Community Service: Character Education in Action" did a survey on community service activities in elementary catholic schools. The sample included 307 schools. Fifty principals in this survey reported having a formal community service programme. All of them were contacted over the telephone and 25 of them were interviewed. One third of the schools within this study also encouraged international awareness through apparel and money collection, letter writing, and twinning. Most principals report that community service is a co-curricular activity and is linked with environmental studies and social studies curriculum.

Rebecca Skinner Westat & Chris Chapman (1999) has conducted a survey on "Service- Learning and Community Service in K-12 Public schools." There were 1,832 schools which actively participated in this survey. The study proves that 83 percentage of public elementary, middle and high schools incorporating service learning in their course curriculum have strengthened relationships among students and they also have enabled the students to see, the school and the community as the key reasons for practicing service-learning.

In their article titled "Community Service Programs in High Schools" Raskoff Sally A & Sundeen Richard A (1999) studied the high school community programs in Los Angeles County. The survey was done on 385 public and private schools administrators' attitude towards community service. They focused on the community organizations for which students volunteered and 285 students from 22 schools in seven areas were interviewed for their descriptions and assessments of their community service experiences. Though there was a positive impact on students, the survey further suggests that the teachers need to learn to train students to reflect and integrate their life experiences.

Scales Peter C, et al., (1999) study on "Increasing Service- Learning's Impact on Middle School Students" provides some significant findings on the development of children to grow up well and healthy at their critical middle childhood stages. It provides insights that can influence to build better relationships of children with themselves and others as well as to form programmes and policies that will improve their lives. It further presents how positive values learned at schools through various environments eventually become deep commitments that can guide young students to think and act. How social competencies learned through service-learning can lead students to respond to new and challenging situations and also sharpen their decision making capacities. In this analytical method the author collected data from more than 1000 middle school students of 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade from three schools. The students who had more than 31 hours of service-learning have lot of reflective thinking and developed many skills in the course of time. Those students who had the most hours of service learning and reflection, were significantly better on numerous social responsibility and academic success than students with less exposure and reflection

Morgan William & Streb Mathew (2001) in their research on "Building Citizenship: How Student Voice in Service – Learning Develops Civic Values" collected the data from about 200 students

from 10 different schools in America. They used Huber regression to assess the impact of student voice in their service learning project. In their findings they show that if students are involved in service learning projects in which they have a higher degree of voice and ownership, their self-concepts and political engagement will improve, and they will become more tolerant toward out-groups.

In her study on "Engaging in Community Service and Citizenship: A Comparative Study of Undergraduate Students Based upon Community Service Participation Prior to College" Bonnet Jennifer (2008) investigated three service groups namely: mandatory volunteers in high school, non mandatory volunteers prior to college, and students who had never volunteered prior to college. The data was collected from 47, 898 undergraduate students at 52 institutions across the U.S. regarding community service participation and significant main effects emerged for service group, gender, and race/ethnicity. The researcher concluded stating that mandatory volunteers reported significantly greater community service hours more than students who never volunteered prior to college. The non-mandatory volunteers performed even greater service hours than the mandatory volunteers.

A research study done by Prentice Mary & Robinson Gail (2010) on "Improving Student Learning Outcomes with Service Learning" using explorative and analytical method contains 24 questions centered on 6 areas such as critical thinking, communication, career and team work, civic responsibility, global understanding and citizen, academic development and educational success. The total numbers of 2,317 students, of which 1,687 were taken from service learners who imbibed the skills and the 630 students from non-service learners. The study affirms that service-learning is a key strategy for student's engagement in valuable learning and to gain additional knowledge beyond school.

Celio Christin I. Durlak Joseph & Dymnicki Allison (2011) in their research on "A Meta-analysis of the impact of service – learning on students" took a total number of 62 studies involving 11,837 students ranging from elementary, middle school, high school and college undergraduate and professional schools of America. In this research the experimental method was used to study the impact of service-learning on students. It indicated that compared to controls, students participating in service-learning programs demonstrate significant gains in five outcome areas such as, attitude toward self, attitudes toward school and learning, civic engagement, social skills and academic performances.

Infante, Taline D. et al., (2015) did a study on "Community Service Learning: An effective Vehicle for Inter Professional Education." Teams of students from four disciplines (medicine, nursing, dentistry, dental hygiene) worked as volunteers with a unique population of transitional homeless families to develop individualized health and wellness plans. Pre and post- participation surveys were used to measure changes in student perceptions of working in multidisciplinary teams. The results showed that there is a positive predisposition in working with each other which was further enhanced by collaborative and inter-professional experience. Community service-learning may be a powerful combination for demonstrating the value of clinical teamwork to health profession students.

Chao Xia (2016) study on "Community Service Learning as Critical Curriculum: Promoting International students' Second Language Practices" using a qualitative method explores how community service learning contributes to international students' English as second language practices and identity development. This study was conducted in Northwestern U.S Duquesne University during the 2013-15 academic years. The university had a total enrollment of 4,781 students from 42 U.S states and 22 foreign counties in the fall semester of 2014. The researcher had used snowball sampling to recruit the participants. The participants represented from six countries: China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Korea, Kuwait and Japan. The age range of the participants was from 20-42. Data were collected from five sources. The primary data included semi-structured individual and group interviews and students' reflective journal entries. The interview questions regarding their thoughts and community service experiences were open-ended and phrased in everyday English. There were a total number of 72 interviews, each of which ranged an average of 50 minutes in length. The reflective entries showed the participants feelings, thoughts, and concerns. The finding indicates that community service learning enabled the participants to speak English without fear.

Community service learning helped them in their reading and writing skills as well as commitment to conduct research. The students' reflective entries indicated that the students' English language proficiency was increased as a result of community service learning. The study suggests that pre-service has to be prepared well and the second language teachers should become critical intellectuals to go beyond text book.

The aforementioned studies have shown that education system does emphases the importance to work experience and community service learning. It is indeed interesting that in India community service is allocated as part of the syllabus in the ICSE and ISC boards, but there are no studies conducted on impact of community service among the children as to whether it helps in improving the skills of the students. However, the review of studies on community service elsewhere has proved that, combined with reflection it has greater impact on students and it shows very clearly the benefits that it creates in the students to be responsible, improve their interpersonal relationships, cultivate critical thinking, self concepts etc.

#### **Life Skills and Different ways of imparting it among students**

Life skill education promotes mental well-being in the young people and empowers the adolescents to take more responsibility for their actions. The pedagogy of life skill education is experiential learning. It influences health, attitudes and values leading to positive behavior and it helps prevent the risk behavior. Life skills education designed to help one to process and structure one's experiences and facilitate the practice and reinforcement of skills.

The child is considered as a product in the present education system which works like a factory because there is no personal touch and therefore personal growth and development of the child is overlooked (Kurian, 2015). Inappropriate education and training system does not help young people (Ramanujam, 2015). It is not the duty of schools to provide only knowledge and information (Kaur & Kaur, 2016) because the information is available so easily everywhere. Therefore at this juncture it is very important to equip the young people with right information which will help them to make informed decision (Parida, 2015).

The central goal of life skill education is to empower the adolescents and envision them to attain a meaningful and healthy life (Laskar, 2015). Life skill education provides an integrated and holistic approach to adolescent development and it is based on a framework where 'core life skills' include thinking skills, social skills and emotional skills (Parmar and Katoch, 2015). "Life skill education is designed to facilitate the practice and reinforcement of psychological skills in culturally and developmentally appropriate way. It contributes to the promotion of personal and social development, the prevention of health and social problems and the protection of human rights (WHO 1999). To prepare the pupils to face the challenges of daily life, life skill education has to be a special subject in school which will respond to the contemporary world (Mahmoudi & Moshayedi, 2012). Life skill education promotes mental well-being in the young people and empowers the adolescents to take more responsibility for their actions.

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), an autonomous body under Ministry of Human Resource Development Government of India, New Delhi, reinforces life skills, sports and games, co-curricular activities as part of mainstream education to include life skill education for co-scholastic assessment of the student. The schools are now mandated to provide and also to assess students on parameters of life skills (Parmar & Katoch 2015). A network of life skill providers is providing life skills training to enhance skilled human capital (Ranjan & Nair, 2015). Not being aware of different approaches, many are resorting to classical approaches in life skill education. Several methods and strategies can be adopted for life skill education and training. Now-a-days strength based approach is being used on a large scale for life skill education. Newer methods like class discussions, Brain storming, drama, dance, theater, sports, role plays, debates, story-telling, case studies games, arts etc are used as a medium for life skill education.

#### **Direct-indirect intervention**

Life skill can be taught directly with the purpose of teaching specific skills or indirectly by observation and experience of the child. In Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) the life skills is given as the part of the syllabus, there are many text books written and used

by many of them. Enormous efforts are also taken to impart or use different methods and techniques to teach life skill among school students. Many of the existing common methods are classroom discussion, debate, role play, brainstorm, story-telling songs and dance, case studies, miming, poetry and recitals and question and answers which orient to teach life skills directly.

There are also other ways of imparting life skills to students but not said explicitly that they intend to teach life skills. Many studies prove that involving children in extra-curricular activities like physical education; they gain confidence and self worth. Students who are involved in planning and taking active participation in out-door learning become responsible. Students become friendly with each other, they make effort to get to know each other and they enjoy each other. They learn to work with each other and when the committees place responsibilities on the individuals and groups they carry out to their highest satisfaction because it is their programme. The gap that exists between students and teachers has reduced as they become more interested in each other (Dawson, 1957). Keeping this in mind many schools have a variety of clubs like eco club, interact club, creative writing and debate, science club, photography club, robotics club, yoga club etc. Children are encouraged to be part of one or more clubs. All the club activities supplement academics and give the students practical training which they require for day today life. It helps the students to display their talent and gain life skills indirectly. Like one of these methods, community service learning could be introduced as an indirect method to teach life and combating the situation that might come, among the school children.

#### **How community service learning as an indirect way as described in the studies**

Community service learning considered as an indirect way implies a context wherein the learning of the students will completely depend on his/her experience and observation. The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2012) defines service-learning as "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities" America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse as a course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain future understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility" (Camara, 2012, p.11).

Community service learning provides opportunity to reconstruct and negotiate their identity, promotes the students to take ownership and creates in them a sense of empowerment (Chao, 2016). Service programmes in the school means to engage the students in experiential learning activities and provide them an opportunity to address the authentic social issues in the community. Experiential education covers a broad range of cognitive and affective outcomes for students. It shows significant positive effects in student's intellectual, social, personal, civic, moral, and vocational development. It improves student's psychological, social and intellectual development (Furco, 1996).

There are various methodologies to impart life skills among students. Class room teachings in life skills, training in life skills, experiential learning, etc., are in vogue. By involving students in community service activities, they are exposed to the realities and challenges of everyday life. This practical exposure may help in the development of life skills in school children. In this sense a structured community service program may enhance life skill development of the adolescent.

#### **Conclusion**

The present analytical study has proved that there had been many studies done on Community Service Learning and how it is impacting on the life of the school children. These studies indicate that there is an effective impact on children when they are actively involved in community service activities. Among the many outcomes such as collaboration, critical thinking, communication and information flow, leadership, empathy and the ability to think critically stands out. The purpose of education is to make children think and ask essential questions that help them to be responsible citizens. Though, on the one hand, the findings express a few difficulties involved at schools to make it part of school curriculum, time constraints and not many

adequate teachers are trained. On the other hand, the studies have sufficiently proved that the importance of teaching life skills at schools has got good amount of influence on children. The pedagogy of life skills education based on cooperative learning, participatory activities and experimental learning have opened new horizons of life formation in education.

Although there are many positive outcomes when students are involved in community service there are also many obstacles and problems faced while carrying out these activities. The teachers need to be motivated and given sufficient training. The community service programme should be well planned and organized within the school hours. This activity will also have greater impact if the students are helped to reflect, integrate and connect to their own lives experiences and learn from it. If students have voice in choosing the venue of the community service and a voice in planning and executing, the impact will be greater in developing the power of one's decision making and sense of responsibility towards one's life and others.

Adolescents are active individuals who learn best by doing rather than talking. In a country like India we need to think out of the box to promote life skill education. There is the facility in all the schools affiliated to ICSE (The Indian Certificate of Secondary Education) and ISC (Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations) (i.e., classes IX to XII) to teach socially useful productive work and community services. But many schools give less importance to it thinking it is less realizable. Therefore, the present research would make use of few hours to conduct an intervention study with structured and planned activities in schools. Community service learning will definitely bring changes in the lives of people and the surrounding environment but the aim of this present study is to find if this could make any attitudinal change in children and build in an authentic character formation. Thus from the above related review it is obvious that the topic of community service and its impact on life skills development among school children selected in this present study is a new area and a prospectus different from the earlier studies done. As the old Chinese proverb goes "Give a man a fish he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish he eats for life time." It is important to equip our present generation of children with right set of life skills so that they can face life courageously with hope.

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