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# Giving Literacy, Learning Literacy: Service Learning and School Book Drives

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# Giving Literacy, Learning Literacy

Anne B. Walker

## Abstract

Service-learning can provide a range of literacy learning experiences for children as they work to solve real world problems and engage in inquiry, collaboration and reflection. Rather than being an extracurricular activity, service-learning projects are designed to meet standards and align with existing curriculum. This article explores how teachers can engage their students in literacy-based service learning using the example of a book drive that supported literacy and children's libraries in Ethiopia. The article draws on both scholarly research and personal experience and provides practical information and resources.

“Through the lens of a book drive that benefited children's libraries in Ethiopia, this article explores how teachers can develop service-learning projects that engage students in authentic literacy experiences.”

The principal of the elementary school that my children attend announced last year that every teacher needed to engage his or her classroom in a service-learning project. My daughter brought home a teacher-written note announcing that her class was collecting children's books to send to school libraries in Africa, and so I helped my daughter select several “gently used” books she no longer read to donate to the project. Her class boxed up the books and shipped them off to a book donation warehouse, the principal announced over the school intercom how many books the class had donated, and the project was finished. Or had it ever really started? Where was the service? Where was the learning? This article explores the concept of service-learning in literacy education through the act of a school book drive.

## What Is Service-Learning?

Service-learning is the direct involvement of students in service-based projects that are explicitly linked to the academic curriculum. Farber (2011) explains, “Service learning is a learning tool to empower students to solve problems...it is a student-driven process where students learn about a particular issue, place, or problem, then figure out how to take action in a positive way” (p. 5). The learning occurs as students research community needs, identify a project, organize and carry out the event, and reflect on the process and results. Instead of passive and receptive learning, students are immersed in active inquiry, collaboration, and critique.

In service-learning, learning and service are recursive. Kinloch and Smagorinsky (2014) contend that “the hyphenation in the term ‘service-learning’ is less a means of punctuation than a semiotic indicator of the two-way flow of service and learning in a service-learning relationship” (p. x). As Hart (2006) emphasizes in more student-friendly language, “the dichotomies of ‘fortunate helping unfortunate’ or ‘us doing for them’ are erased and replaced with ‘us doing for us’” (p. 27).

There are several stages in the service-learning process. The first is Investigation and Inquiry, in which students conduct research on community or global needs as they work to collaboratively identify a project. While local projects provide opportunities for face-to-face interaction with those being served, service at a distance allows students to learn about different communities and cultures (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007).

The next step is Planning, which draws on students’ ability to collaborate and work as a team. Planning also involves developing community partnerships and communicating with stakeholders. This is followed

by the actual Action or Service. While students should be encouraged to reflect throughout the entire project, the Reflection stage at the conclusion of the project involves students evaluating the impact of the project in terms of both their service and their learning. The final stage is Demonstration, through which students share their accomplishments and learning with others both inside and outside the school walls. Throughout the project, the teacher is engaged in facilitation and assessment, “continually taking stock of the degree to which the project is meeting its goals (Kinloch & Smagorinsky, 2014, p. xv).

Service-learning provides multiple opportunities for both literacy instruction and real-world literacy practice, as both oral and written communication are integral to the process. In the Investigation and Inquiry stage, students can practice nonfiction reading strategies as they research community or global needs. They can engage in academic conversations as they debate the merit of one project over another. In the Planning stage, they can use persuasive writing techniques when requesting assistance from outside organizations. During the Reflection stage, “students have ample opportunities to discuss their learning experiences during formal class discussions” (Kinloch & Smagorinsky, 2014, p. xiv), and they can engage in writing reflective texts such as journals, blogs, and learning logs. At the conclusion of the project, students can use multimedia to demonstrate and share their accomplishments with a wider audience. The teacher's responsibility is to ensure that the service-learning project and the literacy activities are designed around the academic curriculum.

The caution in all of this is, as Farber argues in her book *Changing the World Through Service Learning* (2011), that teachers and schools must be careful not to confuse service-learning with community service. “Community service targets a local or global need...the cause and event are usually chosen and led by adults, with support from friends and families” (p. 4). Such was the case with my daughter's school project. The teacher selected the cause and organized the event, and students and families donated books, resulting in well-intentioned charity but not necessarily learning. Opportunities for the students to engage in investigation, planning, reflection, sharing, and as a result learning, were missed.

### **Book Drives as Service-Learning Projects**

Book drives, in which new or donated books are collected and distributed to domestic or international nonprofit organizations, serve an important role in promoting literacy worldwide (Krolak, 2005) and are popular service projects in the United States.

Book donations help support the development and maintenance of school and community libraries in areas of the world where children would not otherwise have access to books (Krolak, 2005). These libraries play a vital role in literacy education in developing countries where government funding for libraries is limited or nonexistent (Dent, 2013) and where millions of people cannot afford basic school supplies such as pencils and paper, let alone books. As the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) states, “The school library is essential to every long-term strategy for literacy, education, information provision and economic, social and cultural development” (IFLA, 2000, p. 1).

A variety of nonprofit organizations provide book aid to developing countries. For example, the U.S. organization Books for Africa has shipped more than 32 million books to African countries since 1988 (Books for Africa, 2014), and the African Library Project has established more than 1,411 libraries with donated books since 2005 (African Library Project, 2014). In the United Kingdom, Book Aid International provided 3,300 libraries in Africa with over half a million books in 2013 (Book Aid International, 2014). Some organizations aid specific countries, such as 1001buku in Indonesia and Ethiopia Reads in Ethiopia. The organization Room to Read, which has established more than 10,000

libraries and distributed more than 13.3 million books in developing countries worldwide since 1998, opened its first library in Nepal with books collected by an elementary school book drive (Wood, 2013).

Book drives are a logical service-learning project for the literacy classroom; students can learn about literacy through the act of giving literacy. But what would this look like in action?

### **Literacy Learning Through a Service-Learning Book Drive Project**

In a service-learning book drive project, students are immersed in literacy and critical engagement from start to finish. They engage in a variety of real-world reading and writing experiences with authentic texts during the Investigation and Inquiry stage as they research the problem (i.e., rates of illiteracy in different countries, lack of libraries and access to books in developing countries). They draw on their ability to compare, contrast, and analyze as they research different book aid organizations that accept book donations, and they practice academic conversation skills as the class decides which organization to ultimately support. During the Planning stage, students can practice communication skills as they contact book aid organizations and write letters requesting book donations from parents and community sponsors. During the book collection phase, students engage in genre study as they sort and classify books. After the event, during the Demonstration phase, students can engage in both expository writing and multimodal literacy by creating multimedia presentation of their work that can be published on a service-learning website (see the Take Action! sidebar). And through Reflection, which takes place throughout the project, students develop a better appreciation of the value of books and literacy both in their own lives and the lives of others.

### **Seeing the Impact of Book Drives Firsthand: A Visit to Ethiopia**

In January 2014, I had the opportunity to volunteer as a teacher trainer for Ethiopia Reads, an organization that has established 61 school libraries in Ethiopia through fundraising and book donations. This was the same organization for which my daughter's classroom had collected books. Ethiopia Reads was founded by children's author Jane Kurtz, who herself grew up in Ethiopia as the child of missionary parents. Ethiopia has one of the world's highest illiteracy rates; currently, more than 40% of youth ages 15–24 in Ethiopia are unable to read, with females lagging significantly behind males (UNESCO, 2013).

As I planned the trip, I crafted two research questions: What impact had the donated books made in Ethiopia? How could the traditional concept of a book drive be re-envisioned as a true service-learning project? Data were collected in part through informal conversations with teachers, librarians, children, and Ethiopia Reads staff during trainings. Formal library observations were also conducted that focused primarily on the book collections and how children were using the libraries and books. Digital photographs were taken to document observations, and field notes were recorded both on-site and in the evenings after library visits and trainings (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Children in a Rural Ethiopian School

I visited a total of seven Ethiopia Reads libraries: two that operated as community children's libraries, three located in urban schools serving extremely low-income students, and two in isolated rural primary schools. I was impressed with the well-lit, spacious, and attractive library spaces with bookshelves full of donated children's books (see Figure 2). I was equally impressed with how the books had been culled; the majority of the books were hardcover, in excellent condition and recently published, and contained both children's classic favorites such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* and popular fiction such as *Harry Potter*. The libraries did not use a formal cataloging system; books were arranged in the general categories of picture books, chapter books and novels, and nonfiction and reference books. None of the libraries I visited allowed children to check out books; the books were considered too valuable, and librarians did not trust that the books would be well cared for or returned (see Figure 3).



**Figure 2** A School Library With Donated Books



**Figure 3** A Teacher Uses a Library for Small-Group Literacy Instruction

The vast majority of books were in English, which posed a language barrier for many children. Children in Ethiopia typically learn to read English as a third language, after first learning one of 81 local languages and then Amharic, the national language. The libraries had one or two shelves devoted to bilingual Amharic–English books or Amharic-medium books; these paperback books tended to be well-worn and showed signs of heavy usage.

I conducted three formal observations at two different libraries when children were present. Two observations took place after school and one on a Saturday morning. One library had tables and chairs for 16 children as well as a large reading mat on the floor; the other had two crowded reading rooms that sat a total of 50 children in hard chairs and tables. During all three observations, students occupied more than 75% of the chairs. At one library I observed the librarian engaging a small group of children in an interactive read-aloud followed by a book discussion and activity. At another library, however, the librarian served only as a monitor, requiring children to be quiet and making sure books were put back in the correct locations on the shelves.

As I recorded the titles of books children were reading and observed their reading activity, I noticed distinct patterns of usage. Secondary students, the vast majority of whom were male, gravitated towards the English–Amharic dictionaries and school study guides on the libraries’ reference shelves to help them complete homework; they did not engage in pleasure reading. When asked why they attended the library, the secondary students said they valued the library both for its academic resources and also because it provided a quiet and comfortable place to study. Most of the students came from homes that were noisy and crowded and that lacked furniture and adequate lighting.

Fostering a culture of reading remains one of the largest challenges for Ethiopia Reads. While Ethiopia has rich oral traditions, reading is not considered a recreational activity and print resources are extremely scarce. As one Ethiopia Reads staff member explained, “Students equate reading with school and studying to pass school exams.”

The organization is working to change this attitude by exposing children to engaging literature at an early age and by making the library spaces as inviting and comfortable as possible. While no statistical data is available to document whether Ethiopia Reads has improved literacy rates, the number of young children using the library for reasons other than schoolwork is encouraging.

In my observations, the elementary-age students, equally balanced between girls and boys, eagerly read storybooks written in Amharic after they finished their homework. They lacked the English necessary to comprehend most of the English-medium books. Children in kindergarten and first grade appeared to find the most pleasure in concept books and nonfiction books with big, bright pictures and few words. They would flip through a book, look mostly at the pictures, then return it to the shelves and select another one to flip through. Fiction picture books popular in the United States such as *Skippyjon Jones* and *Pinkalicious* sat unread on the shelves, remaining linguistically and culturally irrelevant to the Ethiopian context.

These findings support the existing research on international book donations. Chizwina (2011), who studied the efficacy of book floods in South Africa, in which large numbers of high-quality books are donated to a school, library, or community, concluded that the “weakness of this strategy is that in most cases recipients are not familiar with the contents of the book flood, and books donated may not necessarily be relevant to communities” (p. 32). Wood, the founder of Room to Read, concluded that while book donations are well intentioned, “the model of foreign visitors taking yaks and donkeys into remote mountain villages to drop off books” (2013, p. 89) is unrealistic. In evaluating the effectiveness of its libraries, which were initially opened with donated books, Room to Read realized that children

preferred nonfiction books and culturally relevant stories printed in their native languages over donated English-medium books. Thus, while book donations serve an important need, donors and nonprofit organizations need to be mindful of the types of books that will most promote literacy development.

Ethiopia Reads staff reiterated these conclusions. The organization needs English–Amharic bilingual books and dictionaries; in the eastern regions of Ethiopia, there is also a tremendous need for Somali/English bilingual books (both of which are available in the United States). Simple concept books and culturally relevant fiction and nonfiction books are also needed. The libraries also need basic supplies such as crayons, glue, and scissors for children's activities. Beyond physical resources, financial resources are needed so that the organization can continue to train teachers and librarians in book-centered literacy instruction practices and ways to maximize library usage; the librarians are mostly community members who are dedicated to improving literacy but who have no formal training in education, library management, or children's literature.

### **Bringing Ethiopia to My Daughter's Classroom**

When I returned from Ethiopia, I gave a presentation to my daughter's class on my visit to Ethiopia and the Ethiopia Reads libraries. While the students' book drive had not risen to the level of service-learning, I wanted to engage them in the Reflection phase of service-learning and deepen their learning. I wanted them to see how their work had benefited others. We began by identifying Ethiopia on a map of Africa. I showed photographs of Ethiopian children their age who I had met on my trip and who couldn't attend school because their families did not have enough money to buy school supplies. I showed pictures of crowded classrooms with upwards of 70 children, classrooms devoid of books with only an old chalkboard for technology (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4** A Typical Ethiopian Classroom



I talked about children in Ethiopia having to walk miles to school, of girls having to haul water and boys having to herd cattle or camels. I let the students ask questions and I answered honestly. The students' questions did not focus on literacy rates or the extent of the libraries' collections. Instead, they wanted to know more about the country, the culture, and the lives of children in Ethiopia. We discussed the economic and social barriers preventing many children from attending school. The students asked where the Ethiopian students lived, and I showed pictures of huts in rural areas and houses and apartments in urban areas. The students reflected on how their lives differed from those of the children I had met in Ethiopia, and we talked about the importance of books, literacy, and education. I concluded the presentation by showing pictures of Ethiopian children sitting in libraries reading donated books, and I congratulated my daughter's class on having made a difference in the lives of children thousands of miles away. My daughter later told me, "I was happy to see where our books went, and I learned a lot, too" (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5** U.S. Children Read a Bilingual English–Amharic Story About Rural Life in Ethiopia

### **Suggestions for Implementing a Book Drive or Similar Service-Learning Project**

Book drives are one example of a service-learning project that bookends literacy: On one end, students develop literacy skills as they carry out the project, and on the other end, students gain literacy as they reap the benefits of the donated books. Book drives are relatively easy to implement and can consist of parents simply donating gently used children's books.

The following suggestions, gleaned from my daughter's class project and my own research, can help turn a book drive or similar event into a meaningful service-learning project for children.

#### **1 Start small**

If this is your first experience facilitating a service-learning project, keep the scope small. As you facilitate the project, reflect on how you could improve the process the next time you and your students undertake a similar endeavor.

#### **2 Design the project around your curriculum**

Begin by determining what you want students to learn from the project, using your curriculum and standards as a foundation. When seeking approval for the project from a school administrator, emphasize

what students will learn from the project. Determine how oral and written literacy can be incorporated into each of the service-learning stages: Investigation and Inquiry, Planning, the Action/Service, Reflection, and Demonstration. Ideally, the project should also be integrated with other content areas such as social studies and science. For example, if my daughter's book drive had been designed as a true service-learning project, there would have been ample opportunities to integrate literacy with social studies as the students researched and studied the geography, economy, and culture of Ethiopia.

### **3 If a book drive is not feasible, consider similar service-learning projects**

There are many similar projects that bookend literacy learning. Students may decide to hold a fundraiser or collect books for a book sale rather than donate books; the funds can be used to sponsor a library or buy specific books that an organization needs, such as bilingual dictionaries. Alternatively, students may decide to collect donated school supplies instead of books. For younger children, though, the physical aspect of a book drive may be more tangible and meaningful.

### **4 Provide guidance, but let the students do the work**

While the idea of a book drive may originate with the teacher, the students should be responsible for the planning and actual implementation of the project. The teacher can establish the general framework of the project and help guide students through the various stages from Investigation through Demonstration, but students should be the ones doing the service work! The teacher will need to advise students on what is feasible or not, given time and resources, and make sure that students have addressed all pertinent details. For example, the teacher may have to remind students to read donation criteria carefully to see what types of books an organization accepts and whether shipping costs are involved.

### **5 Collect quality books that children will want to read and that are culturally relevant**

Book organization websites typically list the types of books they do and do not accept. When asking parents or others for book donations, students should specify what types of books they need. Because shipping books is expensive, donated books should be carefully sorted and culled to remove any that are not appropriate for donation. Good-quality books not suitable for donation may be sold in book sales with the proceeds being donated to the book aid organization instead. Table 1 provides guidance on what types of books to collect.

**Table 1.** Books Most Needed by International Book Aid Organizations and Libraries

Donate these books:

- New books or books in excellent used condition
- Concept books with universal themes such as shapes and colors
- Books for beginning readers, such as “I Can Read” books
- Simple children's dictionaries and picture dictionaries
- Wordless picture books

- Nonfiction picture books with clear illustrations and minimal words
- Bilingual books (especially in Spanish, French, and African languages such as Amharic and Somali)
- International best-selling books such as *Harry Potter*

Cull these books:

- Books that look old or worn
- Books specific to the United States, such as U.S. history books
- Religious books
- Books based on movies, television shows, and other U.S. popular culture that probably will not be familiar to children living in other countries

## **6 Encourage a personal response from the organization**

It is important for students to know that their service has made a difference. With my daughter's class, I was able to bring back photographs and show the students how their donated books were benefiting children in Ethiopia. Admittedly, this is often not possible, but there are alternatives. If the organization is local, ask a representative to come speak to the class. If the organization is at a distance, encourage the organization to enclose a picture or two with their thank-you card, even if the pictures are just of the books being unpacked at a central warehouse by a volunteer. Better yet, arrange for someone from the organization to video-conference with the class using a free service such as Skype. This personal follow-up helps bring closure to the project.

In conclusion, a book drive or similar literacy-based service-learning project can be a rewarding and meaningful learning experience for students in which literacy is bookended by both giving and receiving.

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