Viewing Service Learning in Basic Education Curriculum through Gender Lens

Oluwatoyin A. ODELEYE Ph.D.
Department of Primary Education Studies (PES)
Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo
Oyo State, Nigeria
Email: todeleye@gmail.com

Abstract

Typically, functional and relevant educational practices are the thrust of learning experiences that are service-oriented. Service-learning shapes the thinking and demeanour of the girl-learner to become more concerned with roots of social issues and concerns. Service-learning also helps the girl-learner to become more proactive and pragmatic in resolving human challenges. Through the process of service-learning, the girl-child's values and subsequent life choices are positively altered. When the girl-child is given educational opportunity which empowers her to use her skills and knowledge in real-life situations, learning extends beyond the classroom into the community. Service-learning gives the girl-child authentic educational experiences and enables her develop empathy for others. Thus, integrating service-learning into pedagogical services delivery will go a long way in developing and enhancing creativity in the girl-child and will also have positive influence on overall development of the nation. The paper concludes by recommending among other things that service-learning be integrated into the curriculum and that pupils, especially the females should be exposed to service-learning right from the home and the elementary school.

Keywords: *creativity, education, gender, girl-child, innovation, service-learning*

Introduction

Across the world, countries are reforming their systems of education to better prepare young people for the increasingly complex and challenging demands of the 21st century. (The Arts Council of England 2003). According to Creative Partnerships in Education (CAPE) UK (2004), today's essential life and work skills include innovation, creative thinking, complex problem-solving, imagining what the future holds and, above all, the ability to cope with choice, uncertainty and the unknown. There is therefore the need to expose students, especially the girl-child to activities and experiences that will enable them garner the above-mentioned life and work skills.

Service-learning provides a platform for such exposure. Service-learning is one of the fastest growing educational initiatives in contemporary primary, secondary and post-secondary education. The list of studies providing evidence and conclusions that service-learning outcomes have been positive for students and involved community partners have grown tremendously (Bringle and Hatcher 1996, Cohen and Kinsey 1994, Panici and Lasky 2002 in Pearce 2007). Service-learning gives students an authentic educational experience while teaching empathy.

Service-learning is an educational approach that combines learning objectives with community service in order to provide a pragmatic, progressive learning experience while meeting societal needs (Wikipedia 2015). Service-learning tries to strike balance between learning goals and community service outcomes. It is committed to leveraging learning activities to meet community needs. Odeleye (2015a) posited that through service-learning, students get a chance to contribute to their communities and discover that no matter their age range, they can make a difference. She explained that service-learning affords every child the platform to inculcate values and virtues of lending a hand for community development while in school. Bitman (2015), while appraising service-learning as a tool for optimal functional learning outcomes, listed some benefits accruable to service-learning:

- A better understanding of diverse cultures and communities.
- Connection with members in own community.

- Learn more about social issues and the root causes of the issues at hand.
- Development of strong leadership, collaboration and communication skills.
- An opportunity to act on a value or belief.
- See how content learned in the classroom is applied in the real world.
- Gain confidence in their individual skills and abilities.
- Develop critical-thinking skills in real-world applications.

With all the advantages embedded in service-learning, it becomes imperative to gear pupils especially the girl-child, towards this worthwhile experience. Girl-child education becomes pertinent for the attainment of national development, as the girl-child who will grow to be a woman is empowered. Girls' education does not only bring the immediate benefit of empowering girls, but is seen as the best investment in a country's development (Odeleye 2015b).

Contemporary Challenges: Need for Pragramatic Solution
There has not been a period when the world system is bedeviled with a lot of socio-cultural and political problems ranging from youth restiveness, poverty, unemployment, economic recession and failures in relationships, like now. With so rapid cross national and intercontinental developments occasioned by globalization, pressures on homes, communities and governments have been monumental. Thus, it becomes expedient to begin to evolve relevant and culturally impacting pedagogical options that will confront many of the lingering issues.

Given the peculiarity of the twenty first century, in times when everyone seems to have embraced western individualism to the detriment of consideration for others, it is the right season to begin to encourage service-learning in children, even the girl child. This study is concerned with the imperative of redressing the failure of many of society's hallmarks of integrity, honour and hard work through integrated service-learning in basic education curriculum for the girl child. The girl child is being fingered here because of her ubiquitous place in the typical African society. Females remain the service agency in most communities

and they are the most abused and vulnerable even though they are very altruistic and dependable (Odeleye 2015b)

Schools are not alone in reflecting on these challenges but they are often a singular focus of exhaustive scrutiny in the perennial quest to identify the appropriate roles that schools, teachers and students should play in responding to local, national and even global changes in our society and culture. In the last century, technological innovations and their potential to transform schools have dominated much of educational change research and literature. Therefore, action is imperative at both local and national levels principally in the developing economies of the world, to embrace service-learning as one of the tools for creativity and innovation in lifelong learning and national development.

Explaining Service-Learning
Service-learning as a form of experiential education has its roots in John Dewey's theory of experience, which states that the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience is the key to learning (Jacoby 1996 in Denby 2008). Dewey's writing informed service-learning through a philosophy of education, a theory of inquiry, a conception of community and democratic life, and a means for individual engagement in society towards the end of social transformation. While Dewey never specifically addresses the conceptualization of service-learning, his writings do analyze five specific areas of relevance to it. They are: linking education to experience, democratic community, social service, reflective inquiry, and education for social transformation. Together, these principles form a pedagogy aimed at the development of democratic values and engaged citizenship (Saltmarsh 1996 in Denby 2008).

Service-learning is an experiential learning pedagogy in which education is delivered by engaging students in community service that is integrated with the learning objectives of core academic curricula. Service-learning offers students immediate opportunities to apply classroom learning to support or enhance the work of local agencies that often exist to effect positive change in the community.

Service-learning occurs when there is a balance between learning goals and service outcomes (Furco 2011). Using the community as a

resource for learning, the primary goal of service learning is to enhance students' understanding of the broader value and utility of academic lessons within the traditional disciplines (e.g. Science, mathematics, language arts, social studies, fine art) while engaging young people in social activities through which they derive and implement solutions to important community issues.

Service-learning has proved successful to such a degree that the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1999) concluded that service learning "should be viewed as among the most powerful of teaching procedures, if the teaching goal is lasting learning that can be used to shape student's lives around the world." The Kellogg Commission's conclusion focuses on the outcomes for students, a clear strong point of service-learning. Students are more motivated, work harder, learn more, and experience lasting benefits from their experience (Cohen and Kinsey 1994, Giles and Eyler 1994, Pearce and Russill 2005 in Pearce, 2007).

Unfortunately, experiential-based service learning that unites learning with the real needs of communities is far from ubiquitous. In the majority of disciplines, students are required to replicate memorized information at the expense of higher-order cognitive skills that are associated with critical thinking (Twombly 1992, Cross 1993).

Higher education also has a tendency to delineate a knowledge set from its context in society. Division of human inquiry into academic departments and disciplines has magnified the ambiguity inherent in reality (Kochelmans 1979). Students are well-trained to perform specific tasks in their primary areas of training and gain the credentials that will help them in acquiring their first job, but they fail to graduate with the skills necessary to deal with multifarious problems that face contemporary society (Boyer Commission 1998). In order to be academically rigorous, service learning needs to be centred on tasks that bring the discipline specific skills to the students while teaching them how to be real world problem solvers.

Though service-learning resembles popular educational practice of project-based learning (that actively engages students in learning through the development of individual or group projects), it is different in that

the learning projects are purposefully community-focused. In service-learning, projects are usually conducted in partnership with members of the community and are designed with a community need in mind. Like a textbook, the community becomes a resource for learning (Furco 2007).

Steps in Service-Learning
Some researchers (Hecht 2012; Perren 2013) have identified seven steps as being crucial in effective implementation of service-learning. They include:

1: *Identification of a community need*
This need can be identified by creating surveys, conducting interviews, reading or listening to the news, or from personal experiences. Most importantly, there should not be assumption of knowing the community needs even though the researcher lives among them. It is always preferred to consult people in the community when identifying their needs.

2: *Research, preparation, and training*
This is primarily concerned with pre-service education and preparation. There is need to gain a greater understanding of why the community need exists (research the cultural, social, historical, and political context of the community need/social problem).
- Based on what is understood of the issue, a service plan of action should be created (emphasize how the service action will tackle the social issue and be meaningful to the affected population/community). Again, it is imperative to consult the community when creating a service action plan.
- Complete skills trainings (make sure that the service-learner is equipped with all skills needed to carry out the service activity).
- Prepare logistics (will the service-learner be working with a partner organization, is any fund-raising needed, when/where will the service activity take place, etc.).

3: Reflection on knowledge gained

In step three, the service-learner will reflect on the knowledge gained/ skills learned from step two. This reflection can include answering questions such as:

Why am I interested in this particular social issue?

How am I connected to the social problem?

How do my personal decisions affect the community need?

What are my biases, assumptions, or preconceptions about the social problem and the population that will be served?

What new things have I learnt about the social issue based on my pre-service education?

What new skills have I learned based on my pre-service training?

How will I use this education and training during the service experience?

What are the goals of the service activity?

What are my personal expectations of the service activity?

What is my general feeling on the upcoming service project (excitement, apprehension, anxiousness, etc.)?

4: Service

Step four is the actual act of serving a community. Service can vary in duration, from short-term to long-term, and in location, from local to international. It can also take a number of forms:

- Direct service (direct interactions with the community being served—examples include serving food to recipients at a food bank, tutoring or training adults/students, etc.)
- Indirect service (packing boxes of medical supplies that will later be distributed to receiving population, restoring a building that is, or will be, a homeless shelter, etc.)
- Advocacy work (lobbying policy makers, raising awareness of community needs, etc.)

5: Reflection on service activity

In step five, the service-learner will reflect on his/her service activity.

- Did the service activity reflect issues that were researched and learned about in step two? How?

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- What skills did I use?
- Which skills were exceptionally important?
- Were there any additional skills that would have been useful to the service activity? If yes, which skills?
- Which goals of the service activity were met? Which ones were not?
- Which personal expectations of the service activity were met? Which ones were not?
- What surprised me about the service activity?
- How did the service experience impact the community need?
- How did my attitude change about the community need and population that was served?
- What changes can I make in my personal life to continue learning about the social problem, address its root causes, and/or serve its affected population?
- What will my next "action/service" steps be?

6: Demonstration of what has been learnt

In step 6, service-learners will demonstrate to others what they learnt throughout the service-learning experience. This may include:
- Sharing their background research
- Demonstrating newly-learned skills
- Discussing with others about the community need/social issue and their service experience

This can take place in everyday conversation, by holding a conference, posting photos from the service experience, communicating on social media, etc.

7: Continuity/Commitment

In step 7, the service-learner never stops being a service-learner! He/she will alter his/her values and subsequent life choices based on the experience he/she had. Service-learners will continue to engage in the issues they learnt about and/or tackle new community needs. Here are some other things that the service learner needs to continually update:
- Identify new volunteer opportunities or possible internships
- Engage in political efforts –write letters to political representatives

- Continue learning about social issues –attend conferences, read the news, etc.

Advantages of Service-Learning

Service-learning offers a way to rethink the ways in which education is delivered at the primary education level. It allows "service-learners" to learn about the root causes of social issues; engage in meaningful service that helps the community to meet its needs or goals; develop the service-learners' character as they reflect on their experience; and share their experience with others.

Other advantages are:
- From classroom students address issues related to their curricula and concerning the community.
- Service learning can ensure that students meet and exceed their academic expectations
- Combination of classroom learning with community needs.
- Collaborative work
- Memorable results, lifelong lessons for students
- Students become producers rather than recipients of knowledge (Furco, 2010).
- Through a variety of community engaging activities students will significantly develop:
  - leadership skills
  - communicative skills
  - problem solving and decision making skills
  - negotiation skills
  - critical thinking skills
  - teamwork, cooperative and collaborative skills
  - and, thus become active and responsible citizens of their community.

Rationale for integrating Service-Learning into the Basic Education Curriculum for the Girl-Child

Before proceeding any further, two pertinent questions need to be raised. First, why should service learning be introduced into Basic Education curriculum for the girl child? Second, what is the place of service learning in the whole Basic Education programme?

Basically, introducing service-learning into basic education curriculum will connect the traditional classroom experience with the real life lessons that come through service. Service-learning will enable the girl child combine her traditional care roles with social service which will make her more relevant in the scheme of things in society.

Service-learning combines several important blocks (e.g. boundary expansion, empowerment, collaboration, active participation) that create the conditions for quality teaching and optimal learning (Furco 2007). Service-learning can be used to teach any subject and meet a wide variety of community needs. Appropriate service-learning approaches will provide the girl child with a series of exercises that will help her to reflect on her service experiences in order to grow in character, in problem-solving skills, and in understanding of civic responsibility (Wikipedia 2015).

Service-learning can be adapted to primary education and can crucially help children particularly girls build early and enduring bonds with school (Gross 2010). Instead of teachers being agents of change, they will become objects of change helping the girl child to think more creatively and be innovative. With service-learning in the Basic Education curriculum for the girl child, schools will transform from being "implementation" centres to become places where issues are researched, explored and solutions are proffered.

Odeleye (2015a) affirmed that service learning in the Basic Education curriculum would enable pupils to think out of box, to solve problems and make a difference for the better. She opined that this would afford girls and boys opportunity to become more imaginative, innovative, enterprising and capable of leadership to equip them for their future lives as workers and citizens.

When little children begin to think and behave ingeniously, this brings vitality to learning, and provides the motivation to tackle bigger challenges and, when effective, it will increase the pupils' confidence and self-esteem. Where originality has an important place in the curriculum, girls and boys typically have very positive attitudes towards learning and they enjoy coming to school.

Conclusion

This paper presented service-learning as a creative and innovative tool of learning that can foster leadership skills and sense of civic responsibility in a citizen especially in the girl-child. Thus, it is opined that integrating service-learning into Nigeria's basic educational system would have far-reaching effects on educational service delivery, produce better citizens and provide a platform for the socioeconomic transformation of Nigeria.

Functional and relevant educational experiences are the thrust of learning experiences that are service-oriented. Service-learning shapes the thinking and demeanour of the girl-learner to become more concerned with roots of social issues and concerns. Service-learning also helps the girl-learner to become more proactive and pragmatic in resolving human challenges. Through the process of service-learning, the girl-child's values and subsequent life choices are definitely altered in the light of her experiences. When the girl-child is given educational opportunity which empowers her to use her skills and knowledge in real-life situations, learning extends beyond the classroom and into the community. Service-learning gives the girl-child authentic educational experiences and enables her develop empathy for others. Thus, integrating service-learning into pedagogical services delivery will go a long way in developing and enhancing creativity in the girl-child and will also have positive influence on overall development of the nation. The paper recommends, among other things, that the females should be exposed to service-learning right from both the home and the elementary school.

Recommendations

It is suggested that service-learning be integrated into the Basic Education curriculum for the girl child and that it should be encouraged at all levels and forms of education. It is advocated that service-learning could be introduced into the Basic Education curriculum as a component of Civic Education while teacher training institutions (universities and colleges of education) should incorporate it into their programmes. This would help teachers across board imbibe the nitty gritty of service-learning and engage same in their teaching and daily lives. Of course, this would

influence the values and thinking of the pupils. Ultimately, the whole socio-political landscape would be positively altered as altruistic, proactive and responsible citizens would begin to emerge.

It is also recommended that service-learning should be intentionally used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and content standards for the girl child. Learning experiences for the girl child should be so defined to engage both the potential and ingenuity of individual learners.

Since societal issues tackled through service-learning are typically interdisciplinary in nature, it may therefore be expedient for the curriculum to be updated to facilitate interdisciplinary learning activities. This would make service-learning permeate most aspects of human capacity development, thus setting the stage for the much needed social revolution in Nigeria.

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