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**WHO IS WINNING IN SERVICE-LEARNING? TEACHERS
SERVING COMMUNITIES FOR POSITIVE YOUTH
DEVELOPMENT**

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Abstract

Building on Lerner's positive youth development framework and using a qualitative approach, our research focuses on a case study of the six Romanian finalist projects of the Regional Service-Learning Award, a joint effort of Latin American Center for Service-Learning (CLAYSS) and several organizations from Central and Eastern Europe. Most of the studies on Service-learning have been focusing on students' outcomes, neglecting the important role of teachers and school administration, leaving room for the need to understand teachers and administrators' perspective on coordinating service-learning projects in order to sustain the continuation of high quality projects, according to the eight key-components of effective service-learning projects: meaningful service, link to curriculum, reflection, diversity, youth voice, partnership, progress monitoring, duration and intensity. Six interviews with the middle-school teachers coordinating the service-learning projects have been conducted to identify students' contribution and benefits in terms of positive youth development, the teacher's profile involved in service-learning projects, and their influence on school success, providing case studies as a valuable resource for higher education.

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1. Introduction

Service-learning (SL) has been defined by Bringle and Hatcher (1995) as:

A course-based, credit-bearing educational experience that allows students to (a) participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 122)

Ehrlich (1996) refers to SL as a pedagogy linking community service to academic study, for the benefit of both. A win-win situation, where each of the two dimensions supports and strengthens the other. Students apply their theoretical knowledge in real-life settings, while addressing community needs and reflecting on the whole experience, developing personal values, character strengths, a sense of community and social responsibility. SL offers teachers an important pedagogical tool based on experiential learning, perfectly suitable for enabling students to participate in all stages of the SL projects, under their careful guidance and supervision.

Regina and Ferrara (2017) stress upon the three basic requirements of a SL project, namely:

- i. A solidarity service developed within a community of place, identity, or interest, with real needs addressed,
- ii. The active involvement of students in all areas of designing, planning, implementing, and evaluating the project, and
- iii. The link between contents and service. Many agree that SL without reflection is futile. Felten and Clayton (2011, p. 78) envision a conceptual framework of SL based on academic contents, relevant service, and critical reflection, usually developed in a partnership between faculty, students, and community members, facilitating civic awareness, personal growth, and academic learning.

The philosophy behind SL has been evolving in time, from charity-based religious beliefs, to profane civic engagement or altruistic millennial social justice (Shek et al., 2021). In charity-based SL projects, the focus is on community needs and adequate service combined with academic learning and development. In the civic awareness and engagement model, students are directed towards assessing the needs of the community, identifying, and developing partnerships with community members and jointly solving community problems. The social justice approach strives to empower students to understand the sources of inequality and injustice, to conceptualize social mechanisms and to identify personal and community meaningful actions able to transform the world we live in.

SL has been embraced by universities on all continents and many international associations (like EASHLE - European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education, IARSLCE - International Association of Research on Service Learning and Civic Engagement, CLAYSS –Centro Latinoamericano de Aprendizaje y Servicio Solidario or Talloires Network) that encourage the use of this innovative pedagogy in credit-bearing courses from a wide range of disciplines.

1.1. Serving-Learning Benefits

SL projects have been proven to have multiple benefits for all the actors involved. Most of the studies focus on students personal, social, and cognitive development, and systematic literature reviews (Salam et al., 2019), and meta-analytical studies have consistently supported the beneficial effects of SL (Celio et al., 2011; Conway et al., 2009; Yorio & Ye, 2012). Several studies have been emphasizing the development of communication skills (Culic & Pavelea, 2022a), problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, intercultural skills, career connections and career clarification (Oster-Aaland et al., 2004), civic responsibility (Marshall et al., 2015) and civic values (Aramburuzabala et al., 2019), learning outcomes and knowledge acquisition (Bonastre et al., 2021) etc. Lim (2007) found out that SL activities, even those from projects with limited intensity and duration, positively impact participants' prosocial behavior, social responsibility, and self-efficacy.

For teachers, the most important gains are related to improved teaching methods and experience, recognition of efforts, long-term collaborations, mentorship opportunities, and increased satisfaction and extra points for promotion. But there are also benefits for the school, in terms of increased visibility, partnerships and positive community relations, escalated retention rates, aligned goals, actions and objectives, and for the larger community, if we think of expertise, products and projects, reduced stereotypes, cultural understanding, useful service, to name just a few, as previous studies suggest (Chung & McBride, 2015; Maras et al., 2014).

For middle schools especially, "well-designed, well-implemented, school-based youth development initiatives have the power to influence a varied array of social, health and academic outcomes", as Greenberg et al. (2003) show.

1.2. Personal Youth Development

Transition to adolescence has been usually perceived as a tumultuous time, full of challenges and expectations, pressure from peers, family, and school, multiple interests, stress, and confusion due to the physical and cognitive metamorphosis (Serbin et al., 2013). Hall's (1904) "storm and stress" notion tends nowadays to be replaced by Lerner's et al. (2011) more constructive, positive strengths-based approach. Positive youth development approach (PYD) contributes to the understanding of the positive impact of SL on adolescents and emerging adults. Shek et al. (2019) beautifully present the most influential theories contributing to PYD approaches advanced by Benson, Lerner, or Catalano. For the current study, we will focus mainly on Lerner's 5C/6C model, as we are interested to see how SL facilitates and promotes students' and teachers' development of connection, competence, confidence, character, care, and contribution.

Influenced by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) and Eccles et al. (1993) ecological perspective, and guided by the work of Martin Seligman, Corey Keyes, and William Damon, Peter Benson, Roth and Brooks – Gunn, Reed Larson and Stephen Hamilton, Emmy Werner and Margaret Spencer, Lerner's model of PYD emphasises developmental plasticity and youth potential and strengths. Jacqueline Lerner proposes five important indicators of PYD. First, competence refers to a positive view of one's own competences related to four areas: social (interpersonal abilities, teamwork, conflict resolution), cognitive (critical

thinking, problem-solving, decision-making), academic (reflected in grades, school attendance and engagement), and vocational (work habits and ability to develop career interests and explore career options). Second, confidence encapsulates the individual's positive self-worth and self-efficacy. Third, comes connection, meaning that the student has positive relationships with other people and organisations, such as peers, family, school, and community. Fourth, character denotes the respect for norms, regulations, morality, and integrity. The fifth C represents caring and compassion for others, empathy, and sympathy. Combined, these five Cs build the sixth C, namely contribution. According to Lerner et al. (2011, p. 545), “youth who exhibit high levels of the five Cs will engage also in contributions to the world around themselves” and she indicated three mechanisms through which PYD can occur, namely: youth programs, school-based practice of SL, and religious organizations.

1.3. Regional SL Awards (RSLA) – 2021 Romanian finalists

The Regional Service-learning Award is a joint effort of partner organizations of the Central and Eastern European Service-Learning Network with the support of Latin-American Centre for Service-Learning (CLAYSS) to give visibility to the work of public, private or social, primary, or secondary schools and NGOs that develop teaching and learning projects together with their communities.

Given the harsh COVID-19 pandemic situation, the 2021 edition of the RSLA was held online, including the launch of the award, the registration, selection and evaluation process, and the award-giving ceremony was held onsite in Prizren, Kosovo, on December 10, 2021 (Interactive open schools, n.d.).

The selection criteria for the awards revolved around collecting and systematizing SL practices allowing students to broaden their knowledge and learning and to transforming their communities, identifying and rewarding schools that integrate service with learning designed for the improvement of the quality of life of the community, recognizing and presenting to the broader audience teachers who coordinate excellent SL projects, promoting citizenship, and offering feedback on the submitted projects, in terms of technical support, reading resources and training material.

The evaluation criteria are inspired from CLAYSS methodology and were focused on: working with and for the community to address its needs, involving students in all stages of the SL project and intentionally linking learning to service. Special attention was given to innovation, sustainability, produced social changes, dissemination and replicability potential of the projects and its effect on learning.

The evaluation process went through three stages. In the first round, national evaluators had to check the formal requirements of the SL project per se. In the second round, the quality of the project was assessed, and a short description of the project was developed, accompanied by an evaluation grid. The third level of evaluation was performed by an international jury committee, consisting of SL experts and representatives, who have ranked the projects based on the CLAYSS five-step model (Sosa Rolón, 2020): motivation, diagnosis, project design and planning, implementation, and closure and multiplication.

A total of 73 projects, from Serbia, Romania, Slovakia, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, were on the books for the Regional Service-learning Awards. Romania was represented by six finalist projects:

- i. Talerele Medio Monte - Technology Highschool of Auto Transportation, Baia Sprie, Maramureş
- ii. Questo – Open the gates to the legend of Răşinari, „Sava Popovici Barcianu” Gymnasium, Răşinari, Sibiu
- iii. Vox Juvenis, Vox Dei - Slimnic Gymnasium, Sibiu
- iv. Reading & Wellbeing workshops, Nr 2 Gymnasial school, „Picior de Munte” , Dâmboviţa
- v. Ticket to Paşcani – Paşcani Special School, Technical College of Railway „Unirea”, “Mihail Sadoveanu” National College, Iaşi
- vi. Safe bike parking - Nr. 2 Gymnazial School, Țețchea, Bihor.
- ii. After a thorough evaluation of all the submitted projects, the winners of the competition were:
 - i. Shkolla 9 vjecare „Nene Tereza” Lezne, Albania, First Award
 - ii. Privatna predškolska ustanova „Sindibad” Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Second Award
 - iii. Nr. 2 Picior de Munte Gymnasium, Boboci, Dragodana, Dâmboviţa, Romania, Third Award
 - iv. Shkolles se Mesme te Bashkuar „Matosh Uka” Fierze, Albania, Honorable Mention
 - v. Gimnazija Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Honorable mention
 - vi. SHMLM Kongresi i Manastarit Posharan, Kosovo, Honorable Mention
 - vii. Slimnic Gymnasium, Romania, Honorable Mention
 - viii. Srednja technicka skola Zajecar, Serbia, Honorable Mention
 - ix. Zakladna skola Andreja Sladkovica, Slovakia, Honorable Mention.

First prize winners received a check of 1000 USD, second place-750, and third – 500 USD. One honorable mention was given to each country, in the pursuit to encourage SL practice to grow and strengthen in each country. Especially in disadvantaged social contexts, SL helps students increase their wellbeing through understanding the needs of their own community and by addressing these needs, they gain a deeper understanding of the issues of the community, of ties and bonds, of mechanisms and outcomes. Students at risk who participate in SL programs have been improving their engagement with and learning about the community (Pak, 2018). They get to develop connections and grow a sense of belonging to a community and a place where they feel that they are given the opportunity to improve themselves and make a valuable impact in the community (Williams, 2016).

2. Research methods

Online interviews with the 6 semi-finalist teachers coordinating the SL projects were conducted via Zoom and registered for the purpose of research. The interviews lasted on average 55 minutes. We have employed a structured interview guide: focusing on the presentation of the school and the nominated project, stages of project preparation and student involvement, SL benefits for teachers, students and community, perceived obstacles in the implementation of the projects, and recommendations for other teachers embarking on the SL adventure.

All six interviewees were full-time teachers in the schools where the projects were implemented. Five of them were female and one male, with ages ranging from 37 to 55. Subjects taught by the teachers included 5 gymnasium classes: civics, English, history, sociology, psychology, and one primary school.

Data analysis was based on the 6-phase iterative thematic analysis procedure following the guidelines delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006). We started by familiarizing ourselves with the data, then generating the initial codes, searching for themes and reviewing them, defining themes, and last, writing up the report.

3. Findings

We have organized the results into three categories: SL benefits for teachers (Table 1), for students (Table 2) and for the community. Following the 6C model of Lerner's et al. PYD (2011), we were able to identify the most valuable information and to code it appropriately. Using a new methodology based on experiential learning challenges teachers. They have to get training first, in order to be able to organize and supervise students in a long-term project. Therefore being able to access the valuable resources of New Horizon Foundation (n.d.) and CLAYSS, local and international organizations, is priceless. In this manner, they benefit from the experience and expertise of people involved in SL for the past two decades. They have access to a network of teachers implementing SL projects and discover new teaching methods and instruments with excellent results. Teachers share their experiences, resources, ideas, and results as best practices. Not only their professional life is enriched, but also personal development arises. Most of the teachers reported personal growth, increased empathy, heightened patience and a deeper understanding of their role and positive impact on students' life. "You grow not only as a professional, but also as a human being", as one of the teachers stated. Self-esteem and self-efficacy are also developed. With the increasing workload during the semester, fluctuations of motivation occur, and SL projects become a boost of hope and determination to go through, to remove barriers and motivate not only yourself, but the students as well. This aspect was particularly significant during the pandemic, as some of the interviewees mentioned. Students found a new purpose, a project to fire their imagination and to spur their creativity, a means of finding a piece of normality in the unpredictable environment. Teachers developed multiple roles, as they became friends, confidants, coaches, counsellors, facilitators, and mentors. A new dimension of the teacher-student relationship was accessed. Teachers encouraged a sense of belonging in students, but also by sharing their experiences with other SL project coordinators, they were able to develop a network of valuable people and resources. With all the Covid-19 regulations and restrictions, school administration support was perceived as even more precious than before. Collaboration with the local authorities gained importance and several times the success of the SL project was dependent on the support of the local counsellors or the maire.

In terms of character strengths, teachers reported hope that things will get better, kindness in the face of diverse adversities, health-related issues and dramatic change in daily routines. Most of them gained perspective, as they had to reflect upon the lessons learned and experiences allowing them to take the bigger picture view. Perseverance was highly exercised, as most teachers faced obstacles and high levels of uncertainty. Gratitude was unanimously emphasized by all six respondents.

Engaging with students in diverse settings allowed teachers to get a better understanding of their personality type, preferences, interests and expectations, core drive and future intentions. A deep care for students' wellbeing and comfort zone not only in the classroom, but also outside the classroom was

nurtured. The pandemic humanized the teachers and even though most interactions moved to the online environment, SL projects were perceived as a breath of fresh air.

Teachers' contribution to school success and community development is reflected in their long-term project continuity. Most of the SL projects submitted to the Regional Service-Learning Award have gained national visibility and have been awarded as well at other national galas, like the Romanian Sustainable Development Fund, and the Public Participation Awards Gala.

These findings are synthesized in the following table:

Table 1. Self-reported SL benefits for the teachers

6 Cs of Positive Youth Development	Assets identified by the interviewees
Competence	personal and professional development, teaching methods, FNO resources, expertise & understanding of SL methodology
Confidence	self-esteem and self-efficacy, motivation, mentoring relationships, determination
Connection	sense of belonging, relationship with students, families and community members and institutions, teamwork, networking, friendships, institutional support
Character	Seligman 24 character strengths: gratitude, hope, kindness, leadership, perseverance, perspective, sense of meaning
Caring	deep understanding of students' personality, needs, expectations, improved relationship with students
Contribution	long-term project continuity, community development, recognition of society (national awards)

In terms of benefits for the students, teachers mentioned the whole six categories of PYD. SL projects have a significant impact on students' communication and problem-solving skills. They learn how to find solutions to problems in real-life settings, in real time, they take the lead when things go tough and team up with colleagues to further the activities of the projects. They learn how to communicate with the authorities, with school administration, and the media. Learn how to conduct group meetings, how to organize an event, how to find sponsors, how to increase awareness and to change attitudes and behaviors. They discover that school can be fun and that knowledge and experience put in context can be extremely valuable. School performance improves and school engagement tends to be higher for students who enroll in SL programs. By pursuing their interests and meeting diverse people from different areas, students can clarify career options and identify role models.

A boost of self-confidence in students was mentioned by all six teachers. Students develop a good sense of who they are, of what they can do under proper guidance, they test their limits and by engaging in new situations, they develop self-efficacy, often challenge their motivation and find determination under stressful or difficult situations. They feel empowered and come to realize that their voice can be heard, that they matter and can make positive changes in their community.

A sense of belonging is built. As students discover teachers in new, complex situations, different from the school setting, they develop a trustful relationship and assume new roles, build teamwork skills and feel the intertwining ties of community networks. Character strengths, such as: love of learning, curiosity and perspective are developed. Students discover zest and thrive to do better. They cultivate social intelligence, and at times, display leadership qualities that in regular school classes would be often

overlooked or totally hidden. The positive impact of SL projects spurs their creativity, curiosity and hunger for new results.

Because they acknowledge the injustice and inequalities in community settings, students gain a deeper understanding of community needs. They observe and sometimes experience first-hand discrimination and marginalization, they encounter diverse stereotypes and discuss their underlying mechanisms, develop civic awareness and civic responsibility, crystallize civic attitudes and values, and cultivate prosocial behavior. A feeling of pride emerges, as they identify with their school, with the Impact club and with the larger community, and regional awards are a long-term validation of their efforts and results. Their contribution is acknowledged and awarded. As one of the teachers said: “We are a small community, but every person matters”.

Table 2. Benefits for the students, as perceived by the teachers

6 Cs of Positive Youth Development	Assets identified by the interviewees
Competence	peer learning, increased skills (communication, creativity and problem-solving, entrepreneurship, languages, civic, leadership, teamwork, organizational skills), improved school performance, school and work habits, career decision-making
Confidence	self-esteem and self-efficacy, motivation, determination, initiative, empowerment
Connection	sense of belonging, relationship with teachers and community members and institutions, trust, teamwork
Character	character strengths, such as: love of learning, creativity, curiosity, leadership, zest, teamwork, perspective, social intelligence
Caring	deep understanding of community needs, decreased stereotypes and discrimination, civic attitudes, awareness, and engagement in school and in the community
Contribution	contribution to family, school and local community, active citizenship

When asked about the benefits for the community, all six teachers have identified both upsides and downsides. Among the most appraised advantages of SL projects, teachers listed: long-term partnerships (with the local maire, other schools, economic agents, or NGOs), decreased school dropout and increased school engagement and performance, continuity of local projects for the community development, advantageous indicators for grant applications for national and European funds for the school and local administration, networking events facilitating the sense of belonging, and increased social capital. Still, not all SL projects ran smoothly. Especially during the pandemic, regulations and restrictions were quite challenging, as students could not meet in person with their teachers and with the beneficiaries, and delays had to be made. The lack of resources was constant, but even more impetuous was the lack of trust in students and in their potential to make a visible change. The teachers often felt the fixed mindset of both the authorities and school management, and relationship with the authorities impeded meeting the objectives of the SL projects. Adjustments and adaptations had to be made, resilience was built. Students

were self-selected after a while, and group cohesion started to emerge. Most of the Impact clubs are relying on an average of 20 active students, even though every year they keep attracting new members.

We asked interviewees to give a short recommendation to other teachers who are new to SL methodology and who would consider starting SL projects in their own school. The interviewed teachers suggested (Table 3): having a very good understanding of what SL is, of its advantages and disadvantages, of its potential and formal requirements. Having a very clear reason why and motivation to develop SL projects even though they require massive time and effort, dedication and hard work. Accessing all the knowledge and expertise others have previously developed, in order to escape the multiple pratfalls of SL pedagogy, allows teachers at times to find the necessary hope and courage to pursue their objectives against all odds and to motivate others as well, to be the catalyst of social changes and reduced inequalities. Last, but not least, one teacher mentioned the importance of dedication and calling, as they should never forget that in the centre of the educational act is the child or the adolescent and his/her positive youth development.

Table 3. Recommendations to new teachers

Teacher	Recommendation	Key take-away
1	“Have a clear understanding of the SL methodology, projects, resources, network, mentoring, of advantages and disadvantages”	perspective
2	“Have a clear understanding of your motivation to get involved in SL projects - dedication and hard work”	reason why and motivation
3	“Use all the help and expertise FNO network is offering”	expertise and resources
4	“Have faith in your power to change things and with a lot of dedication you will succeed!”	hope and courage
5	“SL requires a continuous learning for all the actors involved in order to produce changes”	love of learning
6	“The kids should be our number one priority!”	dedication and calling

4. Conclusions

As indicated by Lerner et al. (2011), SL projects facilitate positive youth development and especially in disadvantaged communities could become an excellent way of increasing the retention rate of students (Kuh et al., 2005). Combining the advantages of SL as an experiential education method with a focus on the PYD framework, middle-school teachers can empower students to become active citizens, thus helping them grow and flourish. Students gain social, cognitive, academic, and vocational competences, while strengthening their connections to peers, school, family, and community. They learn to care for others and to identify and address the needs of their surrounding community, learn civic responsibility and. They cultivate their self-confidence and self-efficacy, develop an internal sense of self-worth, seek solutions and design social changes, discover their potential, and build character strengths they will benefit from for the rest of their adult lives. SL projects are the pretext for actions that can lead to multiple changes in teachers, students, schools, and communities, but to be effective, SL must be embedded into school strategies and action plans to become viable in the long run and to germinate (Culic & Pavelea, 2022b). A lot needs to be done in terms of policy. Offering incentives for schools to implement SL projects, funding training and scholarship for teachers, and aligning curricular standards to

international regulations regarding SL is necessary. Even in the US where SL has a long tradition, funding and project continuation is a continuous struggle. But European funded projects could be a line of interest for middle-school teachers, and the regional SL awards connect educators from neighboring countries.

As the interviewed teachers have suggested, for successful SL projects, a strong partnership with school and public administration is crucial. A lot of effort is put into ensuring the continuity of the projects and most teachers are now recruiting students at the beginning of the school cycle (fifth graders). With the challenges of adolescence “storm and stress” and school pressure, focusing on the positive youth development can help students set personal objectives, envision a more positive future and thrive. We couldn’t agree more with Whitehead and Kitzrow (2010, p. 2) who state that “SL leads to PYD and PYD leads to service”.

Encouraging teachers to participate in the Regional SL awards projects can increase their motivation, facilitate networking and dissemination of best practices, sustaining the continuation of high quality projects, according to the eight key-components of effective service-learning projects (National Youth Council, 2011): meaningful service, link to curriculum, reflection, diversity, youth voice, partnership, progress monitoring, duration and intensity, building up momentum around social changes and validating students’ efforts in contributing to and changing the world. Following the same CLAYSS model, projects can be replicated. Mistakes can be avoided, and mentoring expertise can be used by middle school teachers at the beginning of career or new to the SL methodology and practice.

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