SERVICE-LEARNING AS A CONTEXT FOR SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN AN INDIAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Abstract: The increasing recognition of social and emotional learning (SEL) has highlighted the need for pedagogical approaches that support students' holistic development alongside academic learning. Service-learning has been identified as a promising experiential approach for fostering social and emotional competencies; however, empirical research examining its implementation in Indian middle school contexts remains limited. This qualitative case study explores students' and educators' experiences of integrating service-learning into the middle school curriculum as a method for fostering SEL. The study was conducted at a middle school in Karnataka, India, and employed a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through focus group discussions with ten Grade 7 students and a semi-structured interview with a service-learning facilitator. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in participants' experiences. The findings indicate that students initially experienced uncertainty when engaging in service-learning but gradually developed increased confidence, collaboration, emotional awareness, and a sense of responsibility through active participation and reflection. Collaborative activities provided opportunities for social interaction and shared learning, while reflective practices supported students' awareness of emotions and experiences. Educators perceived service-learning as an engaging approach that enabled students to participate meaningfully beyond traditional classroom instruction. This study provides descriptive insights into how service-learning was experienced as a pedagogical approach for supporting social and emotional learning in an Indian middle school context. While the findings are not intended to be generalisable, they contribute contextually grounded evidence that may inform educators and schools seeking experiential approaches to support students' social and emotional development.

Keywords: service-learning, social and emotional learning, middle school education, qualitative case study, India

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In recent decades, education systems worldwide have increasingly recognised that academic achievement alone is insufficient for preparing students to navigate the complex demands of contemporary life (CASEL, 2024). Beyond cognitive mastery, students are expected to develop social, emotional, and interpersonal competencies that enable them to manage emotions, build relationships, make responsible decisions, and contribute meaningfully to society (Elias, 2006. These competencies are commonly conceptualised within the framework of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), which has gained prominence in educational research and practice across diverse contexts (CASEL, 2024).

SEL refers to the process through which learners acquire and apply skills related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Elias et al, 1997, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2024; Wigelsworth et al., 2021). Research has consistently shown that students who develop these competencies demonstrate improved well-being, stronger social relationships, and enhanced academic engagement (McBride et al., 2016; Brill et al., 2025; Paik et al., 2024; CASEL, 2024). As a result, schools are increasingly encouraged to integrate SEL into everyday teaching and learning rather than treating it as a separate or supplementary programme (OECD, 2024).

One pedagogical approach that has been associated with the development of social and emotional competencies is service learning. Predominantly influenced by John Dewey's educational philosophy, service-learning is an experiential educational approach that integrates academic learning with meaningful community engagement (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007), requiring students to plan, act, and reflect on community service linked to curricular goals (National Youth Leadership Council, 2024). Through participation in structured service activities linked to curricular objectives, students are provided opportunities to apply classroom knowledge in real-world contexts while reflecting on their experiences (National Youth Leadership Council, 2024). This combination of action and reflection distinguishes service-learning from voluntary service or extracurricular community work and positions it as a pedagogically intentional practice (Furco, 1996; Center for Engaged Learning, 2024).

International research suggests that service-learning can contribute positively to students' personal, social, and emotional development by fostering empathy, collaboration, responsibility, and reflective thinking (Folgueiras et al., 2020; Pinto & Ramalho, 2023). While much of this research has focused on higher education, there is growing interest in exploring how service-learning may benefit younger learners, particularly those in middle school who are undergoing significant developmental transitions (Chung, 2015).

Middle school represents a critical period characterised by rapid emotional, social, and cognitive changes (Chung, 2015). During this stage, students experience increased academic demands alongside heightened sensitivity to peer relationships, identity formation, and emotional regulation (Serbin, Stack & Kingdon, 2013). These transitions can place

considerable strain on students' well-being, especially in education systems that emphasise examination performance and content coverage. Consequently, there is a growing need for pedagogical approaches that support both academic learning and socio-emotional development during this formative phase.

In the Indian context, concerns regarding students' mental health and emotional well-being have received increasing attention. Although policy initiatives such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 acknowledge the importance of holistic education (Ministry of Education, 2020), the practical integration of SEL into school curricula remains uneven, with schools often prioritising academic outcomes over structured socio-emotional learning opportunities (Singla & Prashar, 2022). Many schools continue to prioritise academic outcomes, with limited structured opportunities for students to engage in experiential or reflective learning that supports socio-emotional growth (Neelakantan et al., 2024).

Within this context, service-learning presents a potentially valuable approach for fostering SEL in schools. However, empirical research examining how service-learning is experienced by students and educators in Indian middle school settings remains limited. Understanding these lived experiences is essential for informing contextually appropriate pedagogical practices and supporting the meaningful integration of service-learning within school curricula.

Statement of the Problem

Despite increasing recognition of the importance of social and emotional competencies, many school systems continue to prioritise academic achievement over holistic student development (Neelakantan et al., 2024). In India, this imbalance is particularly evident in middle school education, where examination-oriented practices often dominate classroom instruction (Mahajan, 2024). As a result, structured opportunities for students to develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and collaborative skills are frequently limited (Mahajan, 2024).

While SEL has gained global prominence as a framework for supporting student well-being and development, its implementation in Indian schools remains inconsistent (Bhardwaj, 2025). Existing initiatives often depend on external programmes or short-term interventions rather than being embedded within everyday teaching and learning practices (Bhardwaj, 2025). Moreover, many schools lack empirically grounded guidance on how to integrate SEL in ways that align with curricular goals and local contexts (Bhardwaj, 2025; Singla & Prashar, 2022).

Service-learning has been identified internationally as a pedagogical approach that can support socio-emotional development through experiential and reflective learning (Ma, 2018; Chenarani, 2017; Kumari & Rao, 2024). However, most existing studies on service-learning are situated in Western contexts or focus on higher education settings (Kodancha, 2020). There is a relative lack of qualitative research documenting how service-learning is implemented and experienced in Indian middle schools, particularly from the perspectives of students and educators directly involved in such initiatives.

Without context-specific evidence, schools may struggle to adopt service-learning approaches in ways that are meaningful, sustainable, and responsive to students' developmental needs). There is therefore a need for qualitative case studies that explore how service-learning is experienced in Indian middle school contexts and how it contributes to the development of social and emotional learning.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore students' and educators' experiences of integrating service-learning into the middle school curriculum as a method for fostering social and emotional learning. By examining the perspectives of participants involved in a service-learning programme at a middle school in India, the study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of how service-learning is perceived, enacted, and experienced within the school context.

This study aims to document how engagement in service-learning activities influences students' social and emotional experiences, as well as how educators perceive the role of service-learning in supporting students' development. Through this exploration, the study contributes descriptive empirical insights that may inform educators and schools interested in integrating experiential approaches to support SEL.

This study is guided by the following research question: How do students and educators experience the integration of service-learning into the middle school curriculum as a method for fostering social and emotional learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social and Emotional Learning

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a central concept in contemporary education, reflecting a growing recognition that academic success is closely linked to students' emotional well-being and social competence (Paik et al., 2024; CASEL, 2024). SEL is commonly defined as the process through which individuals develop the ability to understand and manage emotions, establish positive relationships, demonstrate empathy, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal challenges effectively (Elias et al, 1997; CASEL, 2024). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) identifies five core competencies of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2024). These competencies provide a widely adopted framework for understanding the skills and dispositions associated with socioemotional development (Wigelsworth et al., 2021). Research indicates that students who develop these competencies are better equipped to cope with stress, engage positively with peers and teachers, and demonstrate improved academic outcomes (Brill et al., 2025; Paik et al., 2024). Numerous studies have reported that school-based SEL initiatives are associated with benefits such as enhanced emotional regulation, improved classroom behaviour, increased engagement in learning, and reduced behavioural problems (McBride et

al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2017; Brill et al., 2025). Importantly, SEL is not limited to discrete programmes but is increasingly understood as a set of competencies that can be nurtured through everyday pedagogical practices and school culture (Paik et al., 2024; CASEL, 2024).

Service-Learning in School Contexts

Service-learning is an educational approach that combines academic instruction with meaningful service activities that address community needs (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007). Unlike voluntary service or extracurricular community involvement, service-learning is intentionally integrated into the curriculum and includes structured opportunities for reflection that connects service experiences with learning objectives (Shor et al., 2017). The defining features of service-learning include reciprocal benefit for students and communities (Sigmon, 1979; Furco, 1996), alignment with academic goals (Alliance for Service-Learning in Educational Reform, 1995), and reflective processes that support learning from experience (Eyler & Giles, 1999. Through participation in service-learning, students are encouraged to apply classroom knowledge in real-world contexts while developing a sense of responsibility and civic awareness (Furco & Norvell, 2019). In school settings, service-learning has been associated with outcomes such as increased student engagement, improved collaboration skills, and heightened awareness of social issues (Celio et al., 2011; Farber, 2018). Research suggests that experiential learning approaches such as service-learning may be particularly valuable for younger learners, as they provide concrete experiences that support learning and personal development (Celio et al., 2011; Farber, 2018). However, the implementation of service-learning in schools varies widely depending on institutional priorities, curricular flexibility, and teacher capacity (Farber, 2011; Science Education Research Center, 2016). As a result, understanding how service-learning is enacted in specific contexts is essential for informing effective practice.

Service-Learning and Social and Emotional Learning

The alignment between service-learning and SEL has been noted in several studies, as both emphasise experiential engagement, reflection, and interpersonal interaction (Saelee-Hiraoka, 2019; Chung & McBride, 2015; Farber 2018). Service-learning activities often require students to work collaboratively, communicate with others, navigate unfamiliar situations, and reflect on their emotional responses (Miller, 2021). These processes create opportunities for the development of SEL competencies such as empathy, cooperation, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making (Farber, 2018). Previous research has reported that students involved in service-learning demonstrate increased social awareness, improved relationship skills, and greater emotional sensitivity to others' needs (Saelee-Hiraoka, 2019). Reflective components of service-learning, such as discussions and journals, have been identified as particularly important for supporting students' emotional understanding and personal growth (Fair & Delaplane, 2014). While theoretical perspectives such as experiential and transformative learning have been used to explain the potential impact of service-learning on student development, many studies adopt a descriptive approach focused on participants'

experiences and perceived outcomes (Saelee-Hiraoka, 2019, Miller, 2021). This study similarly adopts an experiential lens to explore how students and educators experience service-learning as a context for social and emotional learning, without advancing new theoretical models.

Research Gap

Although international literature suggests that service-learning can support social and emotional development, there is limited qualitative research examining how service-learning is experienced in Indian middle school contexts (Kodancha et al., 2020). Much of the existing research focuses on Western education systems or higher education settings, which may differ significantly from Indian schools in terms of curricular structures, cultural expectations, and institutional priorities (Rose & Doveston, 2013). There is a need for contextually grounded studies that document the lived experiences of students and educators engaged in service-learning within Indian schools. By providing a qualitative case study of service-learning implementation in a middle school setting, this study addresses this gap and contributes descriptive evidence that may inform future research and practice.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore how students and educators experience the integration of service-learning into the middle school curriculum as a method for fostering social and emotional learning (SEL) (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as the study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of participants lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings rather than to measure outcomes quantitatively (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The case study design enabled a detailed examination of service-learning as it was implemented within a specific school context, allowing the researchers to capture the complexity of pedagogical practices and participant experiences in situ (Yin, 2018). By focusing on a single case, the study aimed to generate rich, contextually grounded insights into how service-learning was enacted and experienced within a middle school setting (Stake, 1995).

Research Site

The study was conducted at ABC School, a middle school located in Hassan, Karnataka, India. The school serves a Muslim minority community and has shown interest in adopting innovative pedagogical practices alongside its academic curriculum. At the time of the study, the school had begun integrating service-learning activities into selected middle school classes as part of its broader effort to support students' holistic development.

ABC School was selected purposively due to its ongoing engagement with service-learning and its willingness to provide access for qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2015). The school context provided a relevant setting for examining how service-learning was implemented and experienced within an Indian middle school environment.

Participants

Participants in the study included middle school students and an educator involved in the service-learning programme. The student participants consisted of ten female students from Grade 7 who had actively participated in the service-learning activities. These students were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that participants had direct experience with the programme being studied (Patton, 2015).

In addition, one service-learning facilitator who was responsible for designing and implementing the programme participated in a semi-structured interview. The inclusion of both student and educator perspectives enabled a more comprehensive understanding of how service-learning was experienced from multiple viewpoints within the school context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using qualitative methods that facilitated rich, descriptive accounts of participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Focus Group Discussions

Two focus group discussions were conducted with the student participants. Focus groups were selected as they allow participants to reflect collectively, build on each other's responses, and articulate shared experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Each discussion was guided by a semi-structured protocol that explored students' perceptions of service-learning activities, emotional responses, collaborative experiences, and perceived learning outcomes. The focus group discussions were conducted in a familiar school setting to ensure participant comfort and lasted approximately 60 minutes each. With participants' consent, the discussions were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Educator Interview

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the service-learning facilitator to gain insight into the design, implementation, and perceived impact of the programme (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview explored the educator's perspectives on student engagement, observed social and emotional development, and the role of service-learning within the curriculum. The interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent before being transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved several stages, including familiarisation with the data, initial coding, theme development, and refinement.

Transcripts from the focus group discussions and interview were read multiple times to ensure immersion in the data. Initial codes were generated to capture meaningful units related to participants' experiences of service-learning and SEL. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected recurring patterns across the dataset. Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was supported using multiple data sources, including student and educator perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Detailed descriptions of the research context and participants were provided to support transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and parental consent was obtained for student participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and pseudonyms were used in all reporting (BERA, 2018). Data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings related to students' and educators' experiences of integrating service-learning into the middle school curriculum. The findings are organised thematically to reflect recurring patterns across the focus group discussions with students and the interview with the service-learning facilitator. The themes illustrate how participants perceived and experienced service-learning activities in relation to their social and emotional learning.

Initial Engagement and Emotional Responses

Students described their initial experiences with service-learning as a mix of curiosity, uncertainty, and hesitation. Several participants indicated that they were unsure of what was expected of them at the beginning of the programme, particularly because the learning activities differed from their usual classroom routines.

Some students expressed feelings of confusion during the early stages, noting that they were accustomed to more structured, teacher-directed instruction. One student shared that at first, she "did not understand why we were doing activities outside the classroom" and

felt unsure about how the tasks related to her studies. However, as the programme progressed, these initial uncertainties gradually gave way to increased comfort and engagement.

The educator also observed that students required time to adjust to the experiential nature of service-learning. According to the facilitator, students initially sought clear instructions and reassurance but gradually became more confident as they gained familiarity with the activities. This adjustment period was seen as a natural part of introducing a new pedagogical approach.

Learning through Action and Collaboration

A prominent theme across student accounts was the emphasis on learning through active participation and collaboration. Students highlighted that working in groups allowed them to share responsibilities, exchange ideas, and support one another in completing service tasks. Participants noted that collaborative activities encouraged them to communicate more openly and listen to different viewpoints. One student explained that group work helped her "learn how to talk properly with others and understand their opinions." Students also described learning to manage disagreements and negotiate roles within their groups, which they perceived as an important part of the experience.

The educator reinforced these observations, noting that collaborative service tasks created opportunities for students to practise teamwork and problem-solving. The facilitator remarked that students who were initially quiet or reserved began to participate more actively when working in small groups, suggesting that collaborative settings supported broader student engagement.

Reflection and Emotional Awareness

Students frequently referred to reflective activities as an important component of their service-learning experience. Reflection sessions, conducted through discussions and written tasks, encouraged students to think about their actions, feelings, and interactions during service activities.

Several students reported becoming more aware of their emotions through reflection. One participant shared that reflecting on her experiences helped her realise "how I felt when helping others" and allowed her to recognise both positive and challenging emotions. Students also described gaining a better understanding of their reactions when faced with difficulties, such as frustration or nervousness.

The educator emphasised that reflection played a key role in helping students articulate their thoughts and emotions. According to the facilitator, guided reflection supported students in making sense of their experiences and encouraged them to express feelings that they might not otherwise discuss in a typical classroom setting.

Developing a Sense of Responsibility and Purpose

Another recurring theme was the development of a sense of responsibility and purpose among students. Many participants described feeling a greater sense of accountability when engaging in service activities that involved helping others or addressing community needs. Students expressed satisfaction in contributing meaningfully to activities beyond their academic tasks. One student noted that participating in service-learning made her feel "useful" and gave her a sense of pride in completing tasks that benefited others. Others described feeling more motivated to complete their responsibilities because their actions had visible outcomes.

From the educator's perspective, service-learning encouraged students to take ownership of their learning and behaviour. The facilitator observed that students began to demonstrate increased responsibility over time, particularly in terms of meeting group expectations and following through on assigned roles.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings indicate that students and educators experienced service-learning as an engaging and meaningful approach to learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Furco, 2010). Students reported initial uncertainty followed by increased confidence, collaboration, emotional awareness, and a growing sense of responsibility (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Educators perceived service-learning as providing valuable opportunities for students to engage socially and emotionally through experiential activities and reflection (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

These findings highlight how service-learning, as implemented in the school context, created spaces for students to interact, reflect, and engage beyond traditional classroom instruction, contributing to their social and emotional experiences (Kolb, 1984; Furco, 2010).

DISCUSSION

This study explored students' and educators' experiences of integrating service-learning into the middle school curriculum as a method for fostering social and emotional learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; CASEL, 2024). The findings provide descriptive insights into how participants perceived and engaged with service-learning activities within the school context, highlighting patterns related to engagement, collaboration, reflection, and responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

Consistent with existing literature, students initially experienced uncertainty when introduced to service-learning, particularly due to its experiential and less structured nature compared to conventional classroom instruction (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Previous studies have noted that students accustomed to teacher-directed learning may require time to adjust to experiential pedagogies that demand greater autonomy and participation (Kolb, 1984; Furco, 2010). The gradual shift from hesitation to increased confidence observed in this study reflects similar patterns reported in school-based service-learning research, suggesting that adjustment is a common and expected aspect of implementation (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

The emphasis on learning through action and collaboration aligns with prior findings that experiential and group-based activities can enhance student engagement and interpersonal interaction (Kolb, 1984; Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). Students' accounts of working together, sharing responsibilities, and negotiating roles indicate that service-learning provided opportunities for social interaction beyond typical academic tasks. Such collaborative experiences have been widely recognised as valuable contexts for supporting social development and communication skills in school settings (CASEL, 2024).

Reflection emerged as an important component of students' experiences, supporting their awareness of emotions and reactions during service activities (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Students described reflection as a space for thinking about their feelings, challenges, and interactions with others. This finding is consistent with earlier research emphasising the role of reflection in helping students process experiences and articulate emotional responses (Kolb, 1984; Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). In the present study, reflection appeared to function as a supportive practice that encouraged students to pause, reconsider their experiences, and express emotions that may not surface during routine classroom activities (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

The development of a sense of responsibility and purpose was another notable theme. Students reported feeling motivated by the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to activities that extended beyond academic requirements (Furco, 2010). This sense of usefulness and accountability has been reported in previous service-learning studies, where engagement with real-world tasks fostered students' commitment and sense of ownership (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Educators' observations further supported this finding, as they noted increased responsibility and follow-through among students over time (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

Overall, the findings suggest that service-learning, as implemented in this middle school context, created experiential spaces that supported students' social interaction, emotional awareness, and engagement with learning (Kolb, 1984; CASEL, 2024). While the study does not seek to establish causal relationships or generalisable outcomes, it offers descriptive evidence of how service-learning was experienced by participants and how it contributed to their social and emotional learning within the school environment (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study examined students' and educators' experiences of integrating service-learning into the middle school curriculum as a means of fostering social and emotional learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Furco, 2010). The findings indicate that service-learning was experienced as an engaging approach that encouraged collaboration, reflection, emotional awareness, and a sense of responsibility among students (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; CASEL, 2024).

Students' accounts revealed an initial period of adjustment followed by increased confidence and engagement, while educators perceived service-learning as providing valuable opportunities for experiential and reflective learning (Kolb, 1984; Eyler & Giles,

1999). These findings contribute to a growing body of descriptive research highlighting the potential of service-learning to support students' social and emotional experiences in school settings (Furco, 2010).

The study is limited by its focus on a single school and a small group of participants, which may constrain the transferability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Future research may explore instructional strategies, implementation challenges, and theoretical interpretations of service-learning and SEL across diverse school contexts.

Despite these limitations, the study offers practical insights for educators and schools interested in experiential approaches to supporting students' social and emotional development (CASEL, 2024). By documenting lived experiences within an Indian middle school context, the study contributes contextually grounded evidence that may inform further research and practice.

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