

Primary school buddies program as a service learning primer

Service learning Australia

Introduction

This document does not go into too much detail on Buddies Programs or Service learning but rather is designed to bring the two concepts together in order to enhance them and prime students for bigger and better things as they progress through secondary school.

Buddies programs

Buddy programs consist of uppergrade students completing activities or projects with younger children. Older students are paired with younger children from their buddy class and the most effective programs have at least two grade levels between students. This primer assumes that students from the last two years of primary school are buddied with those just starting out.

While it might be tempting for buddies to be matched up by the teachers in advance, the emphasis should be on collaborative planning by all participants. That being said effective buddy classes are timetabled into a weekly school program allowing students to spend between thirty to forty minutes together. Because students are to meet often, it is helpful if the two participating teachers have similar teaching styles. The schedules can be fixed but flexible since there are only two teachers involved. They typically take turns planning the content for each session. The two classes of children meet once or twice before buddies are paired to play acquaintance games. This allows students to help decide compatible pairs by, say, asking them to write down three names of students they would like as their buddy. The teachers match the children by considering the requests as well as the academic, emotional, and social development of their students. They may partner children who both have reading difficulties, a shy child with an outgoing one, or a calm child with an active one. If there are more children in one class than the other, an older child may have two buddies or extra older children might be recruited from other classes. If older children are in danger of missing out, then other younger students could be included.

A preprogram training session is held for the older children before a buddies program begins. Teambuilding exercises and roleplays can be included to provide students with listening and nonjudgmental responding skills. Guidelines for a successful program, such as no "putdowns" and how to model enjoyment of learning, can be emphasized.

This phased primer is pitched at the last two years of primary school, but could be condensed into one. It tends to concentrate more on process rather than content, since the latter is as flexible as the settings in which it is delivered.



Service learning

Service learning is a curriculum-based community service that integrates classroom instruction with community service activities. The service should be organised in relation to an academic course or curriculum, have clearly stated learning objectives, address real community needs in a sustained manner over a period of time and assist students in drawing lessons from the service through regularly scheduled, organised reflection or critical analysis activities, such as classroom discussions, presentations, or directed writing.

An example of a service-learning activity might be a middle school science class studying the environment of a local waterway in order to help preserve the natural habitat of animals. Through classroom studies, the students learn about the environment before applying their knowledge on site by posting signs, studying the soil and water and investigating the impact of industrial development. They then write about their experiences in journals and participate in class discussions about the project and its effect on their lives and the local community.

Some units of work planned as part of Civics Education incorporate community service activities. Schools will interpret the definition of service learning more loosely than as stated. In addition, some states, school districts, and schools supporting service-learning have established definitions different from the ones

used here. For a comprehensive explanation of service learning including resources and links to other sites visit <http://servicelearning.com.au>.

Service-learning is enjoying greater, albeit belated, attention in Australia. From curriculum-based programs integrating academic instruction with community service activities to “faith in action”, service-learning could provide one way forward for a society caught in difficult times, unable or unwilling to accept established spiritual regimes and searching for something with depth to replace it. While this may not be the place to discuss the deeper aspects of service learning, there's no harm in being mindful

Essential Elements of Service-Learning

Strengthens the connections between academic and experiential learning

Provides opportunities to learn new skills and think critically

Involves a diverse group of participants

Involves students in tasks that have clear goals and meet genuine needs

Promotes collaboration, communication and interaction amongst participants

Involves youth in project selection, design, implementation and evaluation

Incorporates reflection activities before, during and after the project

Acknowledges and celebrates the students' service-learning experiences

of what impacts it is having on students' overall development.

Reflection

Effective mentoring programs include time for children to reflect on how things are progressing. At the very least a reflective session should be timetabled around every five weeks, or more if changes are needed. Productive reflection sessions depend on quality facilitation by the classroom teachers. While there are numerous websites devoted to the art of reflection, the aim here is to maintain productive partnerships that stimulate growth in the character and skills of all students. The reflective sessions should be monitored as part of an assessment report on students. Teachers are encouraged to use the student logbooks, available in the Values in Action kit, suitably modified to fit this program.

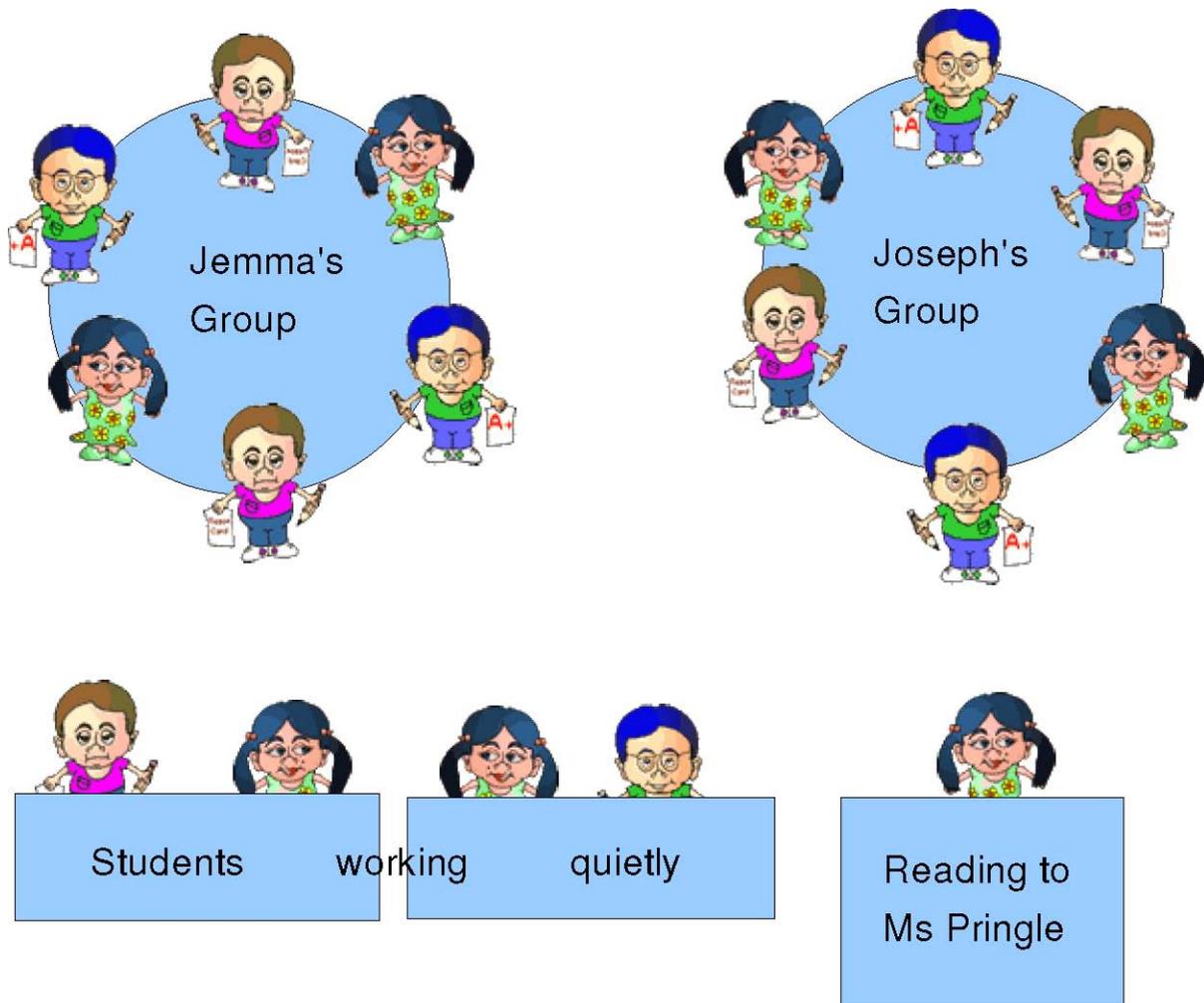
For those teachers new to reflective facilitation, a simple but effective session places the students around an inward facing circle on chairs or the ground usually outside in an area that is quiet and pleasant. The facilitator will start by calling for general feedback on the program so far and allow students to respond. From there the facilitator needs only to be mindful of two things; that reflective statements from students remain relevant and every student gets to contribute. This might be tricky if some students feel as though they're not pulling their weight, however the goal is not to highlight weaknesses but draw on positives that are allowed to permeate the group. If possible have one teacher facilitate while another records.

When students are not relating well to group discussion, the facilitator will need to offer guidance, support, and possibly suggest some ideas, bearing in mind that it is the students who are in control. How far you go with reflection depends on what students are saying. Initially reflective sessions will concentrate on content and process, however it's not unusual for students to raise deeper issues about the effects of such a program on their own wellbeing and spirituality. Towards the end of the program the discussion is likely to move on to what happens next. For example, if students are sufficiently impressed with what they have experienced, how can such activities be introduced into secondary school? What might a secondary service learning program entail?

Research into service-learning has found that effective reflection is the key to enhanced quality of service, knowledge acquisition and cognitive development. Reflection allows students to see the link between their individual acts of service and larger societal issues by deepening the learning that students receive from their service experiences.

Groups

After a period of successful one on one activities, older students should be given the opportunity to support the teaching program through facilitation of small groups within the classroom. The following diagram provides an example where two older students, Jemma and Joseph, assist students who work well in groups, while the teacher, Ms Pringle, listens to individuals reading as the rest of the class works quietly.



Jemma and Joseph will collaborate with Ms Pringle prior to the lesson so that they are well prepared. Ms Pringle must be satisfied that Jemma and Joseph will make a positive contribution to the class and be comfortable with the content of the lesson. All three are encouraged to reflect on the experience. Ms Pringle will complete the appropriate entries in Jemma and Joseph's logbooks. Logbooks are included in the Values in Action kit under Resources at the service learning website.

Conclusion

Service learning can be used to teach any subject and meet a wide variety of community needs. However, to provide valuable service, build civic skills, and increase student achievement, classroom teachers may wish to consider including some of the following practices, which program experience has shown to be effective:

Service activities should be of sustained or significant duration. Program experience suggests that a minimum of 40 hours over a school year is necessary to yield positive results for students and the community.

Teachers need to work with students in order to draw the connections between what the students are doing and what they should be learning. It is important that the buddy projects have clear and specific learning objectives. The service that students perform should have a strong connection to the curriculum they are studying.

The relationship between service and democratic practices, ideas, and history should be introduced into reflection sessions so that students see service as a civic responsibility.

Reflection may involve asking students to keep a journal, or having teachers and organizers lead discussions or coordinate activities that get participants to analyze and think critically about their service. These activities need to be planned, not left to chance.

Students should have a role not only in executing the buddy activities, but also in making decisions about its development. Students should be involved in leadership roles in all aspects of the program.

In order to ensure that service is really useful and strengthens school community ties, strong partnerships based on mutually agreed upon goals, roles, and responsibilities are essential.

Overall, the most important feature of effective service learning programs is that both learning and service are emphasized. Students in quality service learning programs are graded on what they learn, just as they would be for any other class. But they are also expected to carry out service projects of genuine long term benefit which is why the buddy program moves from one on one to group facilitation and, through effective reflection, future projects.