

DR. STIRLING MCDOWELL  
*Foundation*  
FOR  
RESEARCH INTO TEACHING



## TEACHING AND LEARNING RESEARCH EXCHANGE

### Seeking Educational Opportunities for the Gifted: From Community Service to Service Learning

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# Background

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We are nine teachers of eight congregated classes of gifted students in grades 5 through 8. These students are in the program for academically talented students (AcTal) in the Saskatoon Public School Division (SPSD).

As part of an ongoing attempt to deepen and broaden the experiences of our students, we were discussing organizing an “Issues Forum” on a variety of topics. The suggestion arose that students be involved in community service, and we quickly realized that this is an area that deserves special attention. Initial discussion led to the realization that service learning is far more multi-faceted and profound than simple community service, and further exploration of this topic immediately resonated with us. We had been searching for answers to the question, “What can we do to better attend to the needs of the gifted learner?” We were extremely excited about the potential for improvement and expansion of instruction of the gifted through the research and work we would be doing. We believed that this opportunity to study and share our ideas about the very nature of giftedness, and then build a continuum of service learning (with differing components for each of the four years) into the foundation of our program, would be profoundly relevant. And although our focus was the implementation of service learning within our congregated classes of gifted learners, we can see very real possibilities for teachers wishing to provide challenging, extended opportunities for the gifted learners they encounter in their regular classes.

# Research Question

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Our research question was:

*How does service learning affect the talent development of gifted students and their teachers?*

In order to examine this question, we established five objectives:

1. Study current scholarship about the nature of giftedness and the needs of gifted learners, particularly with reference to higher order thinking skills. These skills include creative and critical thinking, specific problem-solving strategies, ethical reasoning and self-directed learning.
2. Develop an understanding of the nature of service learning and the variety of ways that it has been implemented, both locally and internationally.
3. Create opportunities for students to move beyond a simple model of community service to a deeper understanding of social problems, and learn how to address them through community and partnership.
4. Create a developmental scope and sequence list of carefully planned learning opportunities for our students.
5. Develop methods of gathering evidence to determine the effects of service learning opportunities on participants. These methods will include reflection by research teachers, other members of our research team and the students.

# Research Results

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## **CHARACTERISTICS AND NEEDS OF GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS**

As part of this project, we all read current books that discuss various aspects of gifted education. For more information about these resources, please see Appendix A. Students who are gifted and talented have characteristics and needs that are both similar to and different from other learners. These gifted and talented students require differentiated programs and services beyond those provided by regular programming to realize their contribution to self and society.

Gifted and talented individuals possess outstanding potential and/or demonstrate exceptional performance in one or more of the following areas: general intelligence, specific academics, creative and critical thinking, or social, musical, artistic or kinesthetic and leadership skills. Certain intellectual and affective characteristics have been noted in gifted learners. Giftedness is present in individuals from all cultural groups, across all economic strata and in all areas of human endeavour.

### ***INTELLECTUAL CHARACTERISTICS***

Students who are gifted and talented, when engaged, display many similar intellectual characteristics in the areas of motivation, interests, problem-solving ability, memory, inquiry, reasoning, imagination and creativity.

Gifted and talented students demonstrate strong motivation, evidence of a desire to learn. They initiate, direct and sustain individual or group behaviour in order to satisfy a need or attain a goal. They require little external motivation to follow through on work that initially excites them. They demonstrate persistence in pursuing or completing self-selected tasks, evident in school or non-school activities. These enthusiastic learners take great pleasure in intellectual activity and have high aspirations for themselves.

Gifted and talented students have advanced, intense and sometimes unusual interests. They are involved with activities, avocations or subjects that have special worth or significance and are given special attention. They have unusual or advanced interests in a topic or activity, are self-starters and pursue an activity unceasingly beyond their general peer group.

The strong problem-solving abilities of the gifted and talented students centre on their effective and often inventive strategies for recognizing and solving problems. They have acquired a unique process of determining a correct sequence of alternatives leading to a desired goal or to successful completion or performance of a task. They have an unusual ability to devise or adopt a systematic strategy to solve problems and change the strategy if it is not working, to create new designs, to be inventors and to demonstrate logical thinking abilities. They demonstrate rapid insight into cause and effect relationships.

Gifted and talented students are noted for their memory, for their large storehouse of information on school or non-school topics. They demonstrate an exceptional ability to retain and retrieve information. In general, they need only one or two repetitions for mastery. They pay attention to detail and know how to manipulate information. Gifted and talented students are noted for their inquiry; they

question, experiment and explore. They use the inquiry method or process of seeking knowledge, understanding or information. They ask unusual questions for their age and play around with ideas. Their extensive exploratory behaviours are directed toward eliciting information about materials, devices or situations. They take less for granted, choosing instead to seek “how” and “why.”

Gifted and talented students use a logical reasoning approach to figure out solutions. They demonstrate highly conscious, directed, controlled, active, intentional, forward-looking and goal-oriented thought. They show a ready grasp of underlying principles which foster the ability to make generalizations and they use metaphors and analogies. They are critical thinkers, able to readily perceive similarities, differences and inconsistencies. They have the ability to think things through and come up with a plausible answer.

Gifted and talented students are highly curious, imaginative and creative, able to generate highly original ideas and to produce many ideas. They have developed a process of forming mental images of objects, qualities, situations or relationships which aren't immediately apparent to the senses, problem solving through non-traditional patterns of thinking. They show exceptional ingenuity in using everyday materials and independence in thinking. They are keenly observant, have wild, seemingly silly ideas, and are fluent, flexible producers of ideas.

### ***CREATIVITY CHARACTERISTICS***

Clark (1992) stated that creativity is more than intelligence and results from the syntheses of all our brain's functions. Creativity can be divided into two aspects – intellectual abilities and affective abilities. The characteristics of creativity in intellectual abilities include fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration. Fluency is the ability to generate a number of relevant responses and to follow a flow of thought. Flexibility is the ability to approach things in alternative ways and to change categories of thought. Originality is the ability to produce novel, unique or clever ideas, to combine known ideas into a new form or to create the unusual. Elaboration is the ability to expand on basic concepts and to build up groups of related ideas. The characteristics of creativity in affective abilities include curiosity (inquisitiveness), which is the ability to wonder about an idea and toy with it and to discover and explore. Complexity (challenge) is the ability to seek many alternatives to do things in intricate ways, bring structure out of chaos and see missing parts between what is and what could be. Risk-taking or courage is the ability to tolerate ambiguity, a willingness to take a chance and guess or to express ideas to others. It is also having the courage to expose oneself to criticism and defend oneself. Imagination (intuition) is daydreaming or fantasizing, dreaming about things that never happened and projecting into the feelings of others or putting oneself into another time or place.

### ***DIVERGENT AND CONVERGENT THINKING***

Teachers of the gifted can differentiate between two main types of students – divergent and convergent thinkers. Divergent thinkers explore in a number of directions and enjoy making imaginative, intuitive and flexible leaps of insight. They are often highly sensitive to stimuli in the world around them and may pursue unusual, unique and alternative ways of learning. Convergent learners like to process information in a linear, logical sequence and are interested in obtaining the one correct answer. They are interested in factual information and are high achievers in subjects in which there are exact, predictable solutions. Essentially, structured standardized intelligence tests are constructed to identify convergent thinkers.

Gifted students may exhibit sensitivity, intensity, perfectionism and introversion, all aspects of emotional over-excitability. Emotional sensitivity and intensity are characteristics that distinguish students who are gifted and account for their vulnerabilities in childhood and may get them into trouble at school. Many of these creative young people live at a level of intensity unknown to others. Their intense concern with moral issues, concern for others, and their probing of existential questions can give them cause for concern because these preoccupations are so different from those of their peers.

### **AFFECTIVE CHARACTERISTICS**

The affective characteristics of students who are gifted include a heightened sensitivity and empathy, a heightened intensity of experience, perfectionism, introversion, superior humour and a moral sensitivity and integrity.

Heightened sensitivity and empathy can be described as compassion, considerateness and understanding of others, and of having protective, nurturing feelings towards others. These students are easily moved to tears, feel others' feelings and are sensitive to injustice, criticism and pain. They have a strong need for consistence between values and actions within self and others. They are caring and understanding and form strong attachments. They attempt to empower others. They also demonstrate aesthetic sensitivity, an appreciation for complexity in works of art and the ability to interpret works of art. They have an ability to read non-verbal cues and are extremely observant.

Heightened intensity of experience results from the energetic and enthusiastic response to life of the gifted and talented students as they become intensely absorbed in various pursuits. They have a vivid imagination and emotional vulnerability. Because of their emotional intensity, they experience emotions strongly and may therefore be emotionally reactive. They form strong attachments and commitments and have high expectations of themselves and others.

Perfectionism may be present in varying degrees in gifted and talented students. They are often high achievers, exhibiting high personal standards, sometimes setting unrealistic expectations for themselves. They demonstrate persistence, perseverance and enthusiastic devotion to work. Some may give up if their own standards are not met or if a mistake is made. They may be self-evaluative and self-judging, and have feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. They may desire praise and reassurance, becoming extremely defensive if given criticism. They are less tolerant of imperfection in others. Many tend to procrastinate.

Gifted and talented students have deep feelings, are reflective and introspective, and focus on inner growth through searching, questioning and exercising self-corrective judgment. They have knowledge about emotions, and may withdraw into themselves rather than act out aggressively toward others.

Gifted and talented students convey and pick up on humour quickly and well. They demonstrate an ability to synthesize key ideas or problems in complex situations in a humorous way. They develop an exceptional sense of timing in words and gestures. Their keen sense of humour may be gentle or hostile, demonstrating their large accumulation of information about emotions. They have a capacity for seeing the unusual and have uncommon emotional depth, openness to experiences and heightened sensory awareness.

Their strong moral sensitivity and integrity stems from their emotional sensitivity. They have an innate sense of right and wrong. They live a complex inner life, concerned at a young age about ethics. They demonstrate a heightened awareness of the world, advanced moral reasoning and judgment, high moral values, empathic attitude and tolerance towards others. They feel responsible for others and self, and have a just attitude that requires treating everyone by the same standards. They are truthful, authentic and courageous in the face of adversity. They are altruistic and idealistic, desiring to enhance caring and civility in the community and society at large.

### ***ASYNCHRONY***

Potential problems that arise when gifted students are in the regular milieu may be of an intrapersonal, interpersonal or environmental nature. Intrapersonal problems may arise when self-concept, self-esteem and self-acceptance are compromised. Interpersonal problems may cause students to mask their high potential because they may be perceived to be different by their peers and/or teachers (chameleon effect). Environmental problems arise if the school program lacks challenge and the result may be boredom, resentment or disengagement.

Asynchrony, an uneven emotional, physical and intellectual development, is characteristic of some highly gifted young learners. Gifted students, more complex and intense than their peers, may feel that they are out-of-sync with their age peers and with a system-devised, age-appropriate curriculum. This asynchronous development (Cartesian Split) may result in students feeling extremely vulnerable when left in an insensitive environment where intellectual differences are not valued. Their greatest need is each other in an environment where it is safe to be different.

### ***LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS***

Because of their profound emotional intelligence, sensitivity, awareness and potential for self-actualization, students who are gifted often exhibit advanced leadership skills. Exemplary gifted leaders may exhibit some or most of the following behaviours and attributes:

1. Carry responsibility well;
2. Have self-confidence with their peers; respond and relate well to parents, teachers and other adults;
3. Seem comfortable when asked to show their work to class;
4. Seem to be well liked by their classmates;
5. Are cooperative with teachers and classmates;
6. Express themselves well; have good verbal facility and are usually easily understood;
7. Adapt readily to new situations; are flexible in thought and action;
8. Seem to enjoy being around other people;
9. Generally direct the activity in which they are involved;
10. Participate in most school social activities;
11. Are well-coordinated and excel in athletic activities;
12. Pick up verbal and non-verbal cues and can draw inferences.

As research teachers we foresaw the potential for considerable growth in the knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities of both the students and their teachers. Problem-solving, values clarification and development, critical thinking, interpersonal and presentation skills, personal reflection, creativity and a lifelong call to action are but some of these. We believed that people innately possess varying capacities for these talents, but that they can all be enhanced and further developed.

## **WHAT IS SERVICE LEARNING?**

Service learning is learning and development through “hands-on” participation. The intent is to promote reciprocal change in both the recipient and the service provider. Service learning tasks need to be structured, linked to curriculum and involve self-reflection, self-discovery, acquisition of values and skills such as communication, team-building, critical thinking, building self-esteem and a sense of responsibility, and decision-making.

According to the National Commission on Service Learning, service learning ([www.servicelearning.org/what\\_is\\_service-learning/service-learning\\_is/index.php](http://www.servicelearning.org/what_is_service-learning/service-learning_is/index.php)):

- Links to academic content and standards;
- Involves young people in helping to determine and meet real, defined community needs;
- Is reciprocal in nature, benefiting both the community and the service providers by combining a service experience with a learning experience;
- Can be used in any subject area so long as it is appropriate to learning goal;
- Works at all ages, even among young children.

## **WHY DO SERVICE LEARNING?**

There are many reasons why students are encouraged to implement service learning. “Service learning engages students in learning about their communities, participating in active citizenship, and developing their personal social-emotional attributes.” (Thomsen, 2006, p. xii)

*Research shows that organized service learning helps students to consolidate their academic material more fully, adding perspective not available in most classrooms. Students make a contribution to their communities, obviously. This nurtures a sense of civic responsibility and citizenship, not to mention development of the whole person by combining aspects of the head, heart and hands. Students learn how to contribute, by wanting to and doing so.*

*Finally, discussing ethical situations related to various subject areas also helps raise student’s interest in the world around them. Applying ethical concepts to public issues forces young people to consider their environments in ways that merely studying the material cannot. It might even have the effect of incorporating academics more clearly into a student’s world view, making learning more integrated and sustained. It would certainly increase the amount of attention students pay to the broader society. (Education Forum, 2004, p. 8)*

The following is an excerpt from [www.txcscl.org/11reasons.php](http://www.txcscl.org/11reasons.php).

### ***Eleven Reasons to Support Service-Learning***

*In 1998, 1999, 2003, and 2004, the U.S. Department of Education and other agencies conducted studies on service-learning in schools and found the following:*

- 1. Students who engage in quality service-learning programs show increased personal and social responsibility, communication skills, and sense of educational competence.*
- 2. Students who engage in service-learning are more likely to treat each other kindly, help each other, and care about doing their best.*
- 3. Students who engage in service-learning experience higher self-esteem.*
- 4. Students who engage in service-learning are less likely to be referred to the office for disciplinary measures, or engage in behaviors that lead to pregnancy or arrest.*
- 5. Students who participate in high quality service-learning programs are more likely to develop bonds with a variety of adults.*
- 6. Students who participate in service-learning report greater acceptance of cultural diversity.*
- 7. Students who participate in high quality service-learning develop a better understanding of how to effect social change and develop a greater sense of civic responsibility and service ethic.*
- 8. Students who engage in service-learning really feel they can “make a difference.”*
- 9. Students who participate in service-learning score higher on state mandated tests.*
- 10. Teachers and students who participate in service-learning report that service-learning builds cohesiveness and positive relationships between students and teachers.*
- 11. Teachers and students who participate in service-learning report that the general climate of the school is more positive, and there is a greater connectedness in the school.*

### ***WHAT IS HIGH QUALITY SERVICE LEARNING?***

Service learning produces positive results when it is put into action with high quality. Characteristics of high quality service learning (Thomsen, 2006, p. ix) include:

- 1. “...must be linked to standards”*
- 2. “...students need to have direct contact with those being served”*
- 3. “...reflection activities must be cognitively challenging”*
- 4. “...involve youth voice and choice”\**

## SERVICE LEARNING FOR THE GIFTED AND TALENTED

Service learning is one approach that nurtures gifted individuals for the fulfillment of self and the betterment of society. Its interdisciplinary nature allows students to experience issues and learn by constructing meaning as they research, plan, volunteer, engage in authentic problem-solving and decision-making, allowing students to see real life applications of what they have been taught in school (Baska, 2007).

Service learning is a successful way to impart leadership education which embraces the philosophy that leadership contains a set of skills that can be learned. Since many gifted students demonstrate leadership potential (strong sense of social justice, commitment, perseverance, responsibility and confidence), service learning provides an opportunity for practice and experience, opportunities to lead, reflect on their own personal style of leadership and hone lifelong skills of collaboration, verbal persuasion, goal-setting, conflict resolution, planning and prioritizing.

Gifted students, with strong leadership potential, are able to tolerate ambiguity, are sensitive to the feelings of others, like to be in charge, demonstrate initiative, get along with a variety of people, have heightened self-awareness and have high expectations of themselves and others. They tend to have high energy levels and are motivated, enthusiastic and persistent. They are able to process and retain vast amounts of information while being able to see new relationships. They are able to think divergently, solve problems creatively and to reason critically. They prefer complex and challenging work and are able to sequence tasks to complete a goal.

These advanced cognitive abilities and the heightened intensity of gifted children predispose them to experience more profound social, ethical and moral concerns quantitatively and qualitatively. Active participation in well-conceptualized service learning projects can convert intellectually gifted students into constructive and productive individuals (Baska, 2007).

Granting the gifted students the flexibility to pursue research study in their own areas of interest provides students with a sense of ownership and commitment, although younger students may need scaffolding and adult guidance to identify their areas of interest (Baska, 2007).

Many scholars have maintained that many characteristics of gifted adolescents enable them to profit maximally from leadership development. Adolescence is a critical developmental period that requires a delicate balance of individuality and integration into the community (Baska, 2007).

Elements of an effective service learning practice with a leadership development component should include the following considerations (Baska, 2007):

1. Service Learning is not fully effective unless it is fully integrated into a framework of leadership theory.
2. Effective Service Learning allows students to experience issues firsthand, providing students direct knowledge of, and an active interest in, the area of study. It also seeks to maximize student voice in selecting, designing, implementing, and evaluating the service project.
3. Effective Service Learning establishes clear educational goals that require the application of concepts, content, and skills from the academic disciplines.

4. Students are engaged in service tasks that include clear goals, meet real needs in the school or community, and have significant consequences that both the students and the community hold as important and worthwhile.
5. Effective Service Learning engages students in tasks that challenge and stretch them cognitively and developmentally.
6. Effective Service Learning promotes communication and interaction with the community, encouraging partnerships and collaboration.
7. Effective Service Learning values diversity through its participants, practices, and outcomes. Many adult experts would be invited to extend the students' learning.
8. Student reflection occurs before, during, and after the service experience, employing multiple methods that encourage critical thinking. Reflection is the window by which students see the difference their actions have made within the community, even when such actions had seemed insignificant at the time of service.
9. Students need to be mentally prepared and equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills to effectively carry out the service tasks.
10. Multiple methods are designed to acknowledge, celebrate, and further validate students' service efforts.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE**

After many common planning days and a great deal of research, AcTal teachers developed a guide to service learning: a four-year teaching curriculum (see Appendix B).

What follows is a list of activities, projects, literature studies, writing assignment outlines and service action undertaken by the AcTal teachers and their grades 5 to 8 students in the 2006 to 2008 school years.

## **THE COMMON EXPERIENCE (ALL GRADES, BOTH SCHOOLS)**

### ***SPEAKERS AND PRESENTATIONS***

- Craig Kielburger presentation. All students were invited to an evening presentation by Craig Kielburger. His presentation on the "Me to We" organization helped the students to develop thoughts and generated discussion on their own way to serve.
- Student Conference. Each year, a conference is organized by the AcTal teachers to offer students a range of listening opportunities with presenters who have first-hand experience with giving service locally and globally. Students heard a keynote speaker, had a choice of three to four sessions to attend, and engaged in classroom discussion and reflection upon returning to the school. Conference titles included: Making a Difference (2006-07) and Individual Journeys and Giving Service (2007-08).

### ***THE GRADE FIVE EXPERIENCE***

Volunteer Service:

- Work at seniors' home
- Soup days (making soup for the school nutrition program)
- Letter-writing campaign to stop horse slaughter in Canada
- Food bank service
- Money raised for UNICEF to purchase mosquito nets for African countries
- Flooding of the local skating rink
- Collection of blankets for animals for the SPCA
- In-school paper recycling for each classroom

### ***THE GRADE SIX EXPERIENCE***

Literature Connections:

There are a variety of activities that can be carried out to support service learning with literature, such as read aloud, class discussions and reader responses.

Recommended literature for grade six includes:

- *I Am A Taxi* by Deborah Ellis
- *Sacred Leaf* by Deborah Ellis
- *Iqbal* by Francesco D'Adamo
- *Speechless* by Valerie Sherrard
- *Me to We* by Craig Kielburger

Discussion:

Daily current events discussions based on news around the world and a focus on social justice.

Volunteer Service:

Ongoing visits were made to the Saskatoon Convalescent Home, which developed into helping relationships between students and clients.

Humanities:

- Sierra Leone, Interdependence. Unit developed by Janet Sondresen (SPSD) in cooperation with One Sky, Canadian Institute of Sustainable Living.
- Speak out through Silence for Sierra Leone. Students fundraised, participated in a "silent" day at school to create awareness of how children's voices are marginalized and sent sports equipment to Sierra Leone with Saskatoon teacher Ken Marland and through the One Sky organization for environmental projects.
- Service Learning Fair with Sister O'Brien School. Students presented reports detailing service organizations at joint fairs at both Sister O'Brien School and Caswell Community School in Saskatoon.

### ***THE GRADES FIVE AND SIX EXPERIENCE: AWARENESS AND LOOKING FOR ANSWERS***

Class Service Initiative: Sherbrooke Community Centre Project:

Grades five and six classes at Greystone Heights School are continuing to work with Sherbrooke (a unique home for people of all ages requiring long term care - based on the Eden Philosophy) on a special project entitled "A Walk on the Wild Side." The goal is to bring Sherbrooke residents, our students, and the larger community together to create an urban prairiescape on the grounds of the home.

This is a multi-disciplinary project that includes the visual arts, research about local plant species/ecosystems and writing for many purposes and audiences.

### ***THE GRADE SEVEN EXPERIENCE: UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP***

Literature Connections:

Biographies, newspaper articles and relevant non-fiction pieces regarding people and their leadership styles were examined and discussed as a class.

Volunteer Service:

- Food Bank – Home Delivery of Bags
- CHEP – Packing Good Food Boxes

Writing Connections:

- Formal Letter Format
- Formal PowerPoint Presentation
- Reader Response Reflections
- The Interview Process and Questioning Techniques

Independent Research:

Two research projects were undertaken by students to assist their understanding of service learning opportunities and the leadership characteristics of people who give service in society.

1. Formal PowerPoint presentation on an organization of interest to the student and a demonstration of understanding of need within that organization.
2. Examination of leadership styles, analysis of leaders within society, television role-play interviewing world leaders (Telemedia).

### ***THE GRADE EIGHT EXPERIENCE: ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP***

Literature Connections:

A variety of activities can be carried out with literature to support service learning, such as novel study, read aloud, literature circles, class discussions and reader responses. Recommended literature for grade eight includes:

1. World Perspective
  - *A Girl Named Disaster* by Nancy Farmer
  - *Kiss The Dust* by Elizabeth Laird
  - *Throwaway Daughter* by Ting-Xing Ye
  - *Homeless Bird* by Gloria Whelan
  - *Chanda's Secret* by Allan Stratton
  - *Color of My Words* by Lynne Joseph
  - *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis
  - *Shabanu* by Suzanne Fisher Staples
  - *Haveli* by Suzanne Fisher Staples
  - *Taste of Salt* by Frances Temple
2. Local Perspective
  - *Theories of Relativity* by Barbara Haworth-Attard
  - *Tuesday Café* by Don Trembath
  - *Runnerland* by John Burns

- *Hope's War* by Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch
- *Sketches* by Eric Walters
- *Surviving the Applewhites* by Stephanie S. Tolan

#### Class Volunteer Service:

Time was spent volunteering services as a class during class time at various local organizations to gain understanding of community needs. Class discussion and student reflection were key components of these activities. Students provided service at the Food Bank, Salvation Army, John Dolan School, Ronald McDonald House and Hope Saskatoon.

#### Writing Connections:

Writing strategies were based on Saskatchewan Education Learning Curriculum Objectives and student needs. They included a formal letter of request, a comparative persuasive essay and personal journey log and reflections.

#### Class Service Initiative – Project Cuba:

The focus of this project was to move students away from a sense of “volunteering time” to “giving service.” Students had an awareness of the issues affecting students’ lives in Cuba, worked to fundraise sports equipment and supplies to send to a school in Cuba and reflected on their service after watching a video taken of one of our teaching team delivering the items to students.

#### Independent Research and Action:

Based on Roland Case’s *Active Citizenship: Student Action Projects*, students were asked to conduct independent research on a topic of their choice and prepare a presentation based on an understanding the 5-W’s +H associated with that organization an identification of the key stakeholders and their interests affected by the organization, and, lastly, an understanding of the contributing causes behind the existence of the organization. Students were then asked to organize service, give service and reflect on their contributions, in and/or outside of school time. Example organizations included:

- Canadian Blood Services
- The Food Bank
- Church Service
- Ten Thousand Villages
- Crisis Nursery
- The Cancer Society
- St. Paul’s United Church Thrift Store
- WASH
- Saskatoon’s Shrinking Grasslands
- Habitat for Humanity
- World Vision – Greystone 24-Hour Famine
- The Bridge on 20th Fellowship Centre
- CHEP
- Greystone Clothing Depot
- SPCA
- MCC
- The Friendship Inn

## **REFLECTIONS: STUDENT AND TEACHER FEEDBACK REGARDING OUR SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT**

How does one sum up the reactions and learning of approximately 200 students and nine teachers to this experience? Obviously, the answer is that it cannot be done because each individual brings a unique perspective to the experience. However, some trends became evident when examining responses to seven questions posed to both student and teacher learners. The questions were as follows:

1. Some things which I learned about the concept of Service Learning itself by doing this project include...
2. Some things which I learned from researching and participating in Service Learning include...
3. Some things which I learned about myself from being involved in Service Learning include...
4. Highlights, activities or things that for any reason stick out for me regarding the Service Learning project include...
5. Was/is service learning a helpful/useful part of your education?
6. Do you think that your current and future real-life behaviour/involvement has been or will be influenced by Service Learning?
7. If asked, is there anything else that I would want to tell others about my experience at school with Service Learning?

### ***STUDENT FEEDBACK***

It seems fair to say that a large number of our students had only a vague notion of the meaning of service learning prior to our beginning the project. For some, it was quite an eye opener to just realize some of the many needs and responses to needs that exist in our world. Literally, a world of challenges and possibilities opened up for some. For others, learning that one can do much more than make a donation was quite a discovery. On the other hand, still others understood Ghandi's words, "Be the change you want to see" in a much more significant and personal way. Gradually, some folk realized that there is a difference between charity and understanding and responding to challenges in greater depth and over a longer term.

Much of the student learning was a voyage of self-discovery, too. Many commented on the realization that seemingly small acts could be helpful and personally satisfying. Many students acknowledged the sentiment that, "Someone my age can make a difference, too, especially locally." A common thread concerned the self-realization of the possession of leadership skills. Another theme in responses was the importance of doing something of personal interest. Some students were surprised by the issues with which they connected.

As expected, highlights over the last two years varied with the person. Once again many really valued the experiences provided by the two conferences organized by the AcTal teachers. The other most consistently recurring highlight was the opportunity to learn about something in greater detail and to be able to research, plan and implement actions, often in pairs or small groups. Students appreciated opportunities to direct some of their growth in a relevant way.

Relevance was noted repeatedly when students discussed the value of service learning. Connecting their efforts to real world issues was both motivational and enjoyable for many of the students. There was a sentiment that this was more “hands on” for a lot of folk. Many indicated that the experience was opening them to take on more volunteer opportunities in the future. Repeatedly, students reported their growing awareness of both the challenges people face and the ways that they could respond. Many repeated the idea that they had come to realize that even small actions were helpful.

Finally, in the student feedback several recognized that their own passions made a difference regarding how much energy they put into the whole area. Often a lot of planning was required, sometimes to accomplish what might seem to be minor results.

### ***TEACHER FEEDBACK***

After working on the project for several months, all teachers shared their reflections to that point during audio taped conversations. For a summary of these interviews, see Appendix C.

As we neared the end of the grant phase of the project, teachers were asked to respond to the same questions listed above. Once again, their reflections indicated a variety of responses and learning that had resulted from pursuing this focus. Their observations, which are given below in no particular order, included:

- It's worthwhile because students see it as meaningful and relevant.
- Student choice is a desirable component wherever it can be offered.
- It can provide students with a chance to explore passions and can allow them to see their teachers as having these types of passions outside of school.
- One should begin early in a school year because the focus is worthwhile and, if projects are involved, they often require time for evolution.
- It connects well with a variety of subject areas.
- Teachers need to be flexible to allow students true exploration.
- It is good to have a framework such as that offered by Roland Case.
- Processes and components need to be taught and modeled.
- It is a good vehicle for helping students challenge themselves.
- It provided teachers with an opportunity to clarify differences between volunteer work and service learning.
- It helped staff develop a greater knowledge of needs and organizations.
- At the same time it was difficult to find organizations which would accept volunteers under 16.
- Students need to understand the social context of issues if they are going to move beyond service to learning.

### ***CONCLUSION***

In conclusion, there was a feeling that developing a service learning program with academically talented students in grades five to eight, as probably with any group, can pose many challenges. The path is often unclear and filled with obstacles. It can be a lot of work and take some of us out of our comfort zones as we learn with the students. However, when one observes students developing greater knowledge and deeper insight into some of the ways of the world and into helping others, there is no questioning the worthiness of the pursuit.

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## APPENDIX A:

# Annotated Bibliography

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Baska, Joyce Van Tassel, ed. (2007). *Serving Gifted Learners Beyond the Traditional Classroom: A Guide to Alternative Programs and Services*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

In this book, 11 articles articulate different services and programs that have been found to be effective with gifted learners in contexts outside of the traditional school format. Each chapter explains the nature of the opportunity, the research base and some of the issues associated with the opportunity. Chapter 11 on “Learning to Serve: Empowering Gifted Youth to Make a Difference Through Service Learning” is of particular interest. How to meld leadership and service learning to benefit the gifted learner is discussed, as well as a model for these activities.

Boland, Dagny D. (2006). *Ready, Willing and Able: Teaching English to Gifted, Talented, and Exceptionally Conscientious Adolescents*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinmann.

While this book is primarily about teaching English to gifted students in high school and middle years, it is also very useful because it effectively describes gifted students. Boland recognizes who they are and what their needs are, the foremost of which is to be together. Her words and ideas resonate with any of us who work with them. At least the first three chapters should be required reading for all who teach gifted students.

Maccagnano, Ann. (2007). *Identifying and Enhancing the Strengths of Gifted Learners K-8*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press Inc.

Ann Maccagnano in this book gives a brief overview of how the gifted learner learns and reminds the reader that not all students will be gifted in all academic areas. A list of characteristics is provided in the hope that teachers can notice gifted students in the areas of language arts, creative thinking, critical thinking, intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence, math and visual and spatial awareness. The book encourages teachers to assess students to find each student’s strengths and offers suggestions on analysis activities. This book gives an overview of activities that could be incorporated into a classroom of gifted learners. In writing this book, the author has presented activities and lessons to engage, challenge and stimulate gifted learners.

Rakow, Susan. (2005). *Educating Gifted Students in Middle School: A Practical Guide*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press Inc.

Rakow writes a helpful guide to understanding the psychology of most middle years students, further outlining how giftedness can compound and magnify the intensity with which some students face hormonal changes and physical development during teenage years. Although this text is written from the perspective of non-segregated populations of gifted children, primarily those who are integrated among regular classrooms, many of the sample teaching strategies and ideas serve as a guide for beginning teachers of gifted students or for teachers who must plan for gifted students in their classrooms. Rakow supports an approach to

planning that is interdisciplinary, independent and creative in nature. This text would be a very good read for new teachers of gifted students or teachers interested in the complexities of teaching gifted students.

Sousa, David A. (2003). *How the Gifted Brain Learns*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press Inc.

In this book, David A. Sousa applies current brain research to best practice in gifted education. Extensive research data are included, but he balances these with practical suggestions for working with gifted students. Each chapter includes an “applications” section that includes checklists, summaries and practical activities for the classroom. A variety of topics is discussed, including the identification of gifted individuals, ways to challenge gifted students, underachieving gifted students and the twice-exceptional brain. He emphasizes that a good understanding of how the brain functions is crucial to the development of programs that will meet the needs of gifted learners. This book is an excellent resource for teachers in congregated gifted programs as well as teachers in a regular program who need to adapt for their gifted students.

# APPENDIX B:

## Scope and Sequence

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### A LEARNING CONTINUUM FOR GRADES 5 TO 8 ACTAL CLASSES

Grade Level	5: Awareness	6: Looking for Answers	7: Leadership	8: Active Citizenship
<b>Learning Components</b>	*Learning opportunities to lay groundwork for service learning: - awareness-raising through class work, field trips, speakers, literature, etc. - examination of problems and solutions tried - direct teaching of and practising reflection	*Learning problem-solving process & applying it to environmental issues (events that have called for leadership) *Continuing to teach and practise reflection *Introducing examination of topic of leadership	*Learning about leadership theory and different models of leadership *Reviewing and reinforcing reflection process *Learning about how to revise and rework plans of action *Guest speakers related both to leadership and to service	*Review and reinforce reflection, revision, and plan development (as studied and modeled in Gr. 7)
<b>Action Components</b>	*Two whole class projects or experiences: - one related to natural science - one people-based	*Two projects: - one allowing student choice among four or five small group projects - one being a class-planned environmental project	*One individual and/or one class project: - studying people and their needs (individual) - may include studying and critiquing a real or fictitious leader(s) (individual) - modeling and carrying out a class project (could be direct or indirect service)	*Individual or small group (student-designed) project: - investigate issue - create proposal - carry out plan - revise as needed - reflect - prepare follow-up project or paper, journal, photos, scrapbook, etc. *Possible follow-up once in high school
<b>Curricular Connections</b>	Language Arts - Heroes unit Social Studies - Identity unit	Social Studies - Interdependence unit (taught through use of Sierra Leone unit) Science - Ecosystems	Social Studies - Power Language Arts – Courage, Telemedia Identity (personal leadership style)	Social Studies - Citizenship, Government Structure, Interdependence, Culture Language Arts - In Search of Justice
<b>Focus</b>	Global issues Raising awareness	Local or Global	National/ International	Any of the previous
<b>Caswell/ Greystone Heights Contact</b>	Conference involving both schools	Conference involving both schools		Sharing through making presentations with counterparts in own or other building

## **GOALS FOR OUR PROJECT**

- Opportunities for choice and the development of ownership for projects undertaken will increase throughout the four years of the AcTal program as students become more involved and develop their ability to think critically and reflect on their experiences.
- Students will develop their willingness to take risks and try new things.
- Both students and their teachers will grow in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and abilities.
- Students will connect what they are learning to their own passions and will contribute to the betterment of society, both in elementary school and beyond (that is, we hope a lifelong commitment to lead and serve in a variety of ways will be developed).

## **KEY COMPONENTS OF OUR SERVICE LEARNING CURRICULUM**

- Students carry out real work related to real issues.
- Students learn and practise the process of reflection.
- Genuine needs are identified and partnerships are established (that is, students develop plans for service through communication and collaboration with those affected rather than thinking up their own solution(s) in isolation).
- This work is connected to learning objectives in the curriculum.
- Awareness is developed through a trans-disciplinary approach that takes away the boundaries that traditional subject areas put in place. Service learning, therefore, is infused throughout the students' entire four years, whether they are actively working on an individual or group project, or simply digging into underlying issues in an impromptu class discussion.
- Closure and validation occurs at the end of a project, but within the context of a spiral, cyclical process that builds on reflection and evaluation with a view to continued work.

# Teacher Interviews

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## **SERVICE LEARNING – REFLECTIONS AND QUESTIONS GLEANED FROM SEMI-STRUCTURED INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS**

Considering the range in the amount and kind of teaching experience, the length of time the teachers have taught in the AcTal Program and the varied life experiences, priorities, and personalities of all nine teachers, it came as no surprise that they came at this project from different angles and with different levels of commitment. All gave much thought to the task; what actually happened in the eight classrooms bears the stamp both of the teacher(s) and of the students themselves. The interviews also took paths that were unique to each individual; although we had hoped that carving the time out of the school day rather than trying to do the interviews after 3:30 when all were tired would give the gift of time for reflection (a rare commodity for the busy teacher), I venture to say that the interviews were more helpful to those who “think out loud.”

Here are some thoughts that were generated (in no particular order):

- How do you truly get beyond community service to service learning? Does it come through putting emphasis on (and continually returning to) the awareness piece?
- Is a scope and sequence necessary? Helpful? Restrictive? Should it be organized around issues? Will doing this every year as an integral part of the AcTal Program make kids more indifferent rather than more compassionate and actively caring? Or will it help this “flow through the veins of our kids?”
- Event-planning is so much easier than addressing real issues and questions – did we get side-tracked by planning for the Making a Difference conference?
- Direct teaching is crucial (at all grade levels there is such a range of prior knowledge and predisposition).
- Is what we have tried to do just good teaching, rather than something special or unique to our Program? Should/can it be expanded to the whole school?
- Teachers new to AcTal need more guidance and direction; they are told that there is greater depth and breadth, that what happens is qualitatively different, and that these kids need to be together, but the specifics of how to build the day, the year, a lesson, a unit, etc., are somewhat of a mystery; perhaps this service learning piece, further fleshed out, could help provide some much-needed structure for the teacher?
- Should this be taught as a unit (or set of integrated units – social studies, language arts, science, etc.) for a set amount of time in the year or does it need to be the underpinning, the touchstone, of all that is done throughout the year?
- Student choice is key (although not all are sure how to go about accommodating it).
- What is everyone’s commitment level to this project? Are all still on board – and, if so, to what extent? If not, how will this project go forward into its second year? Folks need to be honest about this – and about other important questions/issues confronting the teachers in a specialized program such as AcTal.

- Communication is essential as this project moves ahead – there have been problems getting everyone together and being on time – how can this be addressed? Even within buildings the communication isn't always happening.
- What is too much? What is not enough? When is it time to move on? Or is it ever?
- Do gifted learners have an obligation to use their talents for the greater good? To what extent can/should we work to move them in this direction? What about their independence?
- How can P.D. days be most useful?
- And what the heck IS service learning anyway? Is there a definition all can agree on? Is that necessary?
- Does a discussion about AcTal in general need to happen? What questions would be raised?



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