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Problem Identification and Meaningful Service Delivery: Evidence from Community Service Learning in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the effect of school problem identification practices on Community Service Learning (CSL) outcomes among public primary school pupils in Nairobi County, Kenya. While CSL is a core component of the Competency-Based Curriculum, limited empirical evidence exists on how the initial problem identification phase influences service delivery outcomes. The study employed an ex post facto research design, collecting data from Grade 7 class teachers across 69 selected schools through simple random sampling and 32 learners sampled for focus group discussions from public primary schools in Nairobi County. Data were analysed using ordered logistic regression to assess the impact of different problem identification methods on CSL outcomes. The findings indicate that, after controlling for teacher and school characteristics, problem identification practices significantly influence service delivery. Projects in which problems were identified collaboratively by learners and community members, or through systematic research, demonstrated higher levels of meaningful service. The study concludes that collaborative and research-driven identification processes enhance project relevance and learner ownership. These findings are significant for educational policymakers, highlighting the need for structured guidelines that promote collaboration between pupils and communities to improve the effectiveness of CSL implementation.

Key terms: Community-service learning, problem identification practices, school characteristics, teacher characteristics.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Schools often implement service learning with a primary focus on its potential benefits for students, with little or no emphasis on the possible implications for those served by the activity and their broader community (Mitchell, 2008). Although service-learning activities can promote goodwill and enhance the school's image, there is often limited attention to how school practices might foster mutually beneficial relationships between the school and the wider community (Boyle, 2007). This gap highlights the need to examine not only student outcomes but also how service-learning initiatives contribute to community well-being.

Globally, one illustrative example comes from Argentina, where pupils participate in academic service learning, an experiential pedagogy that integrates community service with the objectives of core academic curricula. Academic service learning provides students with contextualised, real-world learning experiences, enabling them to understand the practical value of lessons in disciplines such as science, mathematics, social studies, and the arts. In addition to reinforcing academic concepts, students engage in social activities that address pressing community issues, fostering skills in problem-solving and civic responsibility (Scheckley & Keeton, 1997). By linking classroom learning to community needs, academic service learning simultaneously enhances academic achievement and promotes civic development (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

In the African context, similar principles are reflected in Tanzania, where schools have long practised service learning through Nyerere's educational philosophy of Education for Self-Reliance (1967). Nyerere emphasised self-reliance and social solidarity, promoting the Ujamaa ideology as a form of African socialism rooted in traditional communal values. Ujamaa, meaning 'familyhood' in Kiswahili, encouraged care for the welfare of all members of a community, extending obligations beyond one's immediate family. From the late 1960s, Ujamaa shaped Tanzania's political, social, and economic life through education, promoting values such as compassion, sharing, and support for the underprivileged (Nyerere, 1968; Nkulu, 2005). These principles remain relevant today, demonstrating the capacity of service learning to instil universal human values and foster inclusion.

In Kenya, Community Service Learning (CSL) is practised in a largely unstructured manner across schools (CSL Mapping Report, 2017). The report indicates that much community service does not translate into meaningful learning. To address this, the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) developed a CSL framework that identifies the main strands of service learning. This framework emphasises learner-centred approaches, with inquiry and problem-solving as central strategies. CSL teachers are expected to facilitate learning by guiding students and refining their experiences through the application of classroom lessons. Parents also play a key role, providing basic needs, a conducive learning environment, and influencing learners' selection of materials, while actively engaging in and contributing to the learning process (KICD Community Service Learning, 2019).

By examining service learning across these diverse contexts, from Argentina to Tanzania and Kenya, this paper highlights how structured pedagogical frameworks, guided by social responsibility and community engagement, can simultaneously enhance student learning and benefit communities. Understanding these approaches provides valuable insights into designing effective CSL programmes that integrate academic learning with meaningful community impact.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Service Learning (CSL) is an educational approach that integrates community service with academic learning, aiming to foster both personal and academic growth among pupils. This literature review examines how schools implement CSL and how these practices influence student outcomes.

Service learning is a comprehensive educational strategy that promotes knowledge transfer through practical projects, developing students who can engage in critical thinking, reflective practice, and action grounded in empirical evidence and human values (Furco, 1996). Eyler and Giles (1999) highlight the importance of defining clear learning objectives within CSL programmes, asserting that students perform better when they understand the purpose and goals of their service activities. This alignment between service activities and academic objectives enhances engagement and academic growth. Dewey's (1938) experiential learning theory posits that meaningful learning occurs when students connect classroom learning with real-world experiences, a view supported by Jacoby (2015) and Furco (2010), who emphasise the positive effects of curricular integration on student performance. Similarly, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle underscores reflection as a core component of learning, with Bringle and Hatcher (1999) suggesting that regular reflective practices enable students to link their service experiences to academic content and develop critical thinking skills. Kiely (2005) further confirms the value of reflection in enhancing student outcomes.

Effective CSL programmes also rely on strong, collaborative partnerships with community organisations. Eyler and Giles (1999) emphasise that trust, mutual respect, and collaboration enrich students' service experiences and promote meaningful learning outcomes. Tropman (2001) highlights the importance of support and guidance for students, noting that mentorship and supervision help learners overcome challenges and excel in their service roles. Assessment and feedback mechanisms are equally vital; Astin (1997) and Einfeld and Collins (2008) argue that schools should implement evaluation tools such as rubrics and self-assessments, providing constructive feedback to ensure the success of CSL initiatives.

Despite these insights, research gaps remain. There is limited exploration of how CSL frameworks can be adapted to diverse cultural and community contexts. While reflection is recognised as crucial, there is little detailed guidance on structuring reflective practices to promote deeper learning and critical thinking.

CSL has demonstrated a significant impact on both academic and personal development, offering students hands-on opportunities to apply classroom knowledge to real-world problems. Research highlights positive outcomes, including improved academic achievement (Yorio & Ye, 2012), enhanced critical thinking skills (Orr et al., 2009), and increased student engagement (Billig & Waterman, 2003). CSL also fosters civic responsibility and community involvement (Eyler, 2002), aligning with educational goals of preparing students for both academic success and active citizenship. In Kenya, a CSL pilot programme implemented by the Ministry of Education and the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) in collaboration with Educate! demonstrated notable benefits. The study, involving 65 secondary schools across ten counties, found that students who participated in CSL were more likely to secure employment, exhibited higher entrepreneurial initiative, and earned nearly double the income of their peers by the end of high school (Biashara Kenya, 2019; Educate! Annual Report, 2016).

These outcomes indicate that CSL not only enhances academic performance but also equips students with essential life skills such as leadership, financial literacy, and problem-solving. The approach is particularly

beneficial for academically struggling students, enabling them to build confidence and practical skills. CSL is student-centred and engaging, allowing teacher trainees to apply theoretical knowledge to local community challenges. By promoting values such as teamwork, respect for diversity, and social responsibility, CSL contributes to the development of responsible, community-minded citizens (KICD, 2019; Gardner, 2002). However, the pilot highlighted the importance of proper planning, coordination, and stakeholder involvement for sustainability and success.

CSL is increasingly recognised as an effective tool bridging academic learning and community engagement. Nevertheless, consistent implementation remains a challenge. Effective CSL requires careful planning, ongoing support, and clear communication among students, teachers, community organisations, and local authorities. The Kenyan experience shows that alignment of these elements can significantly enhance student development, particularly for those who may not excel in traditional academic settings. Yet, challenges such as resource constraints, uneven teacher preparation, and scalability must be addressed to ensure equitable and meaningful CSL experiences. Further research is needed on the long-term impact of CSL across demographic groups and strategies for sustaining partnerships with community organisations.

CSL allows students to apply academic knowledge to practical community issues, integrating multiple disciplines. For example, projects that promote civic responsibility may draw on history, literature, philosophy, life skills, and theology. This multidisciplinary approach encourages students to see how knowledge from different areas can contribute to solving community challenges. Integrating life skills education into university curricula enhances students' understanding of CSL and provides guidance for conducting community-based projects. To optimise learning outcomes, CSL should involve all students in a course, department, or school, fostering collaborative problem-solving. Instructors facilitate the process by guiding students in executing meaningful projects, such as teaching practice and fieldwork, which enable students to apply learning in local communities beyond their institutions.

The success of CSL depends on the quality of project design and fidelity of implementation (Billig, 2010). Effective projects share characteristics such as sufficient engagement time, relevance to student interests, active participation in decision-making, and authentic collaboration with community partners (Celio et al., 2011). Structured CSL projects typically follow six steps: investigation, planning, action, reflection, demonstration, and celebration. During the investigation phase, students gather and analyse data on a community issue, followed by planning, where potential solutions are developed and critically assessed. Execution, reflection, demonstration, and celebration phases ensure that both students and the community recognise and appreciate the efforts made.

In summary, CSL promotes holistic student development by integrating academic knowledge with real-world application and social responsibility. To maximise its effectiveness, CSL requires thoughtful design, quality implementation, and strong collaboration with communities. Key factors include student interest, engagement, and authentic community partnerships, although logistical challenges, resource limitations, and institutional support can affect outcomes. By addressing these factors, CSL can deliver meaningful learning experiences while contributing positively to the wider community.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study sought to determine the effect of school problem identification practices on Community Service Learning (CSL) outcomes among pupils in public primary schools in Nairobi County, Kenya. An ex post facto research design was employed because it is appropriate for examining cause-and-effect relationships in situations where experimental manipulation is neither feasible nor ethical, and where the researcher cannot select, control, or manipulate the independent variables. The target population comprised 38,546 Grade Seven learners and 225 class teachers drawn from 225 public primary schools across eight regions in Nairobi County. Data on Community Service-Learning outcomes were collected from community service teachers in 69 schools selected from the eight regions. The schools were sampled using simple random sampling through the lottery method, with approximately 30 per cent of schools selected from each region to ensure adequate representation. In addition, 32 learners were purposively selected to participate in focus group discussions in order to provide deeper insights into their experiences with Community Service-Learning activities. Data were analysed using ordered logistic regression to assess the impact of different problem identification methods on CSL outcomes.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Problem identified for the CSL project

To understand the types of problems schools identified for the Community Service Learning (CSL) project, the study conducted a descriptive analysis of the responses.

Table 1: Problem identified for the CSL project

Variable	***%***
Poor garbage disposal practices	52
Poor drainage systems	10
Drug abuse	6
Inadequate water	15
Soil erosion	13
Jiggers outbreak	2

Most schools (52%) identified poor garbage disposal practices as a key issue, which contributes to environmental pollution and an untidy environment. This indicates that schools were actively addressing local environmental challenges through service-learning initiatives. 15 per cent of schools reported inadequate water as a major problem, highlighting significant challenges related to water and sanitation infrastructure within the communities they serve. 13 per cent cited soil erosion, 10 per cent mentioned poor drainage systems, six per cent indicated drug abuse, and two per cent observed a jigger outbreak.

The identification of drug abuse suggests that social issues, such as substance misuse, are prevalent within the communities served by these schools, emphasising the need for holistic approaches in community development that address both social and environmental challenges through CSL initiatives. Similarly, the jigger outbreak points to community health concerns, including poor sanitation and hygiene practices, which require targeted interventions alongside other service-learning activities.

Community Service-Learning Outcomes

The researcher assessed teachers, who served as participants, to evaluate learners based on the expected Community Service-Learning (CSL) outcomes. A scale ranging from 1 to 4 was used, where 1 indicated "below expectation," 2 represented "approaching expectation," 3 denoted "meeting expectation," and 4 signified "exceeding expectation." The CSL outcomes assessed included enhanced learning, core competencies development, community connection, and meaningful service delivery. Descriptive analysis was conducted, and the mean scores were calculated. The results are presented in Table 2.

Two sub-components were examined when assessing the enhanced learning outcome. Most students were reported to meet expectations in their ability to explain the importance of CSL. However, when it came to illustrating the general steps of a CSL project, the majority of students scored 2, indicating they were approaching expectations.

The development of core competencies involved seven elements. Respondents indicated that students scored below expectations in critical thinking and problem-solving, imagination and creativity, self-efficacy, and digital literacy. Conversely, most learners were reported to be approaching expectations in learning to learn, communication, and collaboration. Notably, in the citizenship element, respondents observed that students met expectations. Regarding the community connection and meaningful service delivery outcomes, participants indicated that most learners were approaching expectations.

Table 2: Indicators of CSL outcomes

Variable	Category	Mean score
Enhanced learning	Ability to explain the importance of CSL	3
	Ability to illustrate general steps of a CSL project	2
Development of core competencies	Communication and Collaboration	2
	Critical thinking and problem-solving	1
	Imagination and creativity	1
	Citizenship	3
	Learning to learn	2
	Digital literacy	1
	Self-efficacy	1
Community connection	Learners' interaction with the community	2
Meaningful service delivery	Community needs to be addressed	3

Regression Results

To address the research objective, ordered logistic regression analysis was employed to examine the effect of problem identification practices on Community Service-Learning (CSL) outcomes. Prior to modelling, chi-square tests were conducted to determine whether significant relationships existed between the

outcome variable (meaningful service delivery) and each categorical explanatory variable. This preliminary analysis helped identify which variables warranted further examination in the regression models. Only variables showing a significant relationship with the dependent variable were included in the subsequent regression analysis. The chi-square results indicated that gender, level of education, school type, and school location had significant associations with CSL outcomes.

Three sequential regression models were then developed. The first model (Model 1) examined problem identification practices in relation to CSL outcomes. Model 2 assessed problem identification practices while controlling for school characteristics. Model 3 extended this by controlling for both school and teacher characteristics, including gender, years of experience, and level of education. Significance test results are reported for each model, including log-likelihood values, log-likelihood ratio tests, pseudo-R-squared values, and their corresponding p-values. The findings from the three models are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Ordered Logistic Regression Models for Problem Identification Practices Fitted Against Meaningful service delivery

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	LLR	P value	LLR	P value	LLR	P value
2a1 Problem identified by learners	4.25	0.069	4.80	0.051	5.50	0.052
2a2 Problem identified by the teacher	3.85	0.059	5.40	0.066	3.10	0.068
2a3 Problem identified by learners with the help of the teacher	4.10	0.143	3.65	0.057	4.35	0.061
2a4 Problem identified jointly by learners and community	4.65	0.002	4.31	0.011	6.90	0.023
2b1 Problem identified through research	0.80	0.018	5.75	0.210	6.70	0.023
2b2 Problem identified through suggestions	0.65	0.260	8.60	0.290	4.55	0.344
2c1 Problem identified exists in the school	4.80	0.029	7.40	0.052	4.10	0.084
2c2 Problem identified affects the local community	4.40	0.057	4.63	0.038	3.70	0.032
School type - Day & Boarding Public			6.53	0.047	8.97	0.036
School type - Day Private			7.91	0.035	11.67	0.023
School type - Day Public			8.22	0.021	9.38	0.03
School location - Urban			12.0	0.002	12.67	0.015
Gender - Male					9.5	0.021
Log-likelihood	62.648		41.43		23.83	
LLR	15.11		7.34		4.32	
Prob > chi2	0.000		0.021		0.034	
Pseudo R-squared	0.107		0.091		0.045	

Source: (Survey Data, 2024)

Regression Results

In Model 1, the log-likelihood was 62.648, with a Log Likelihood Ratio (LLR) of 15.11 and a p-value of 0.000, indicating a statistically significant model. The pseudo-R-squared value of 0.107 suggests that approximately 10.7 per cent of the variation in meaningful service delivery can be explained by differences in problem identification practices. Specifically, problems identified jointly by learners and the community were highly significant (LLR = 4.65, p = 0.002), and problems identified through research were also significant (LLR = 0.80, p = 0.018).

Model 2 showed a log-likelihood of 41.43, an LLR of 7.34, and a p-value of 0.021, indicating a significant model. The pseudo-R-squared value of 0.091 indicates that 9.1 per cent of the variation in meaningful service delivery can be attributed to problem identification practices when controlling for school characteristics. Problems identified jointly by learners and the community (LLR = 4.31, p = 0.041) and problems affecting the local community (LLR = 4.63, p = 0.038) were statistically significant. School type for Day & Boarding Public (LLR = 6.53, p = 0.047), Day Private (LLR = 7.91, p = 0.035), and Day Public (LLR = 8.22, p = 0.021) were all significant, as was school location (Urban) (LLR = 12.0, p = 0.002).

Model 3 reported a log-likelihood of 23.83, an LLR of 4.32, and a p-value of 0.034, indicating a significant model. The pseudo-R-squared value of 0.045 shows that 4.5 per cent of the variation in meaningful service delivery is explained by problem identification practices when controlling for both school and teacher characteristics. Problems identified jointly by learners and the community (LLR = 6.90, p = 0.023), problems identified through research (LLR = 6.70, p = 0.024), and problems affecting the local community (LLR = 3.70, p = 0.032) were all statistically significant. School type for Day & Boarding Public (LLR = 8.97, p = 0.036), Day Private (LLR = 11.67, p = 0.023), and Day Public (LLR = 9.38, p = 0.030) were significant, as were school location (Urban) (LLR = 12.67, p = 0.015) and gender (Male) (LLR = 9.5, p = 0.021).

Overall, these results indicate that problem identification practices significantly influence meaningful service delivery across all models. The log-likelihood ratio tests confirm the significance of the overall models. In Model 1, problem identification practices explained approximately 10.7 per cent of the variation in meaningful service delivery. Controlling for school characteristics in Model 2 reduced this to 9.1 per cent, and further controlling for teacher characteristics in Model 3 reduced it to 4.5 per cent. Significant predictors across all models included problems identified jointly by learners and the community, as well as problems affecting the local community.

These findings highlight the transformative potential of problem-identification practices within Community Service-Learning (CSL). They emphasise the fundamental link between proactive problem-solving and meaningful service delivery, demonstrating that when schools actively engage students in identifying and addressing real-world challenges, they foster academic growth, civic responsibility, and social awareness. Moreover, school type and teachers' years of experience play crucial roles in influencing CSL outcomes. These results suggest that schools should focus on refining problem-identification practices and consider the experience of their teaching staff to maximise the benefits of CSL programmes.

Focus Group Discussion Findings

These findings are further supported by the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) responses from learners, who indicated that they primarily identified the CSL problems through observation and inquiry within their communities. One respondent noted, *"I learned how to identify the challenges my community faces and how to come up with the best solutions."*

The typical process for problem identification practices involves students engaging in discussions to identify problems, defining their existing knowledge, generating hypotheses, establishing learning objectives, and assigning individual tasks for further exploration (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2019). The instructor facilitates this process by posing open-ended questions rather than providing direct instruction. Critical characteristics of problem identification practices include learning driven by complex and open-ended problems, collaborative work in small groups, and teachers acting as facilitators of learning (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2019). In contrast to traditional lecture-based methods, problem-based learning places greater responsibility on students for their learning, reducing the reliance on direct instruction. Students learn through contextualised problems and real-world situations, with group dynamics and independent research fostering deeper comprehension and the development of learning and problem-solving skills. These practices also contribute to the enhancement of teamwork and collaborative abilities among students.

The findings align with those of Spinello and Fischbach (2018), who conducted a study titled *Using a Web-Based Simulation as a Problem-Based Learning Experience: Perceived and Actual Performance of Undergraduate Public Health Students*. In this research, a web-based computer simulation was piloted within an undergraduate health behaviour course. The simulation involved a virtual community in which the effects of a simulated infectious disease outbreak could be explored and different interventions tested. Their findings indicated that a problem-based learning (PBL) experience centred around a community simulation can effectively educate public health students.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study concludes that problem identification practices in Community Service-Learning (CSL) significantly influence service delivery outcomes. Specifically, when problems are identified collaboratively by learners and the community, pupils demonstrate greater ownership and engagement, resulting in more meaningful service delivery. The collaborative nature of this process fosters a deeper understanding of the issues being addressed, thereby enhancing the overall learning experience. Similarly, problems identified through systematic research also have a positive impact on service delivery, as research-driven identification tends to focus on real and pressing community concerns. Conversely, problems identified without either collaboration or research do not significantly improve meaningful service delivery. These findings underscore the importance of actively involving both learners and the community in the identification of relevant issues to ensure effective and impactful CSL initiatives.
Recommendation: Educational policymakers should create formal guidelines that promote structured collaboration between pupils and community members during the project initiation phase.

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