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# Service Learning In Thailand

**S**ervice learning has a long and distinguished history. This concept was modeled in the life of Christ<sup>1</sup> and has been emphasized in traditional Adventist literature, where one sees a strong connection made between service, education, training/learning, and happiness and contentment. Ellen G. White wrote: “In our life here, earthly, sin-restricted though it is, the greatest joy and the highest education are in service.”<sup>2</sup>

In the educational arena, current secular literature describes service learning as altruistic participation in organized service experiences. These activities, which are embedded in the curriculum, help students learn to apply new knowledge, understandings, skills, and values as they meet real community needs.<sup>3</sup>

The foundations of service learning, according to U.S. educators Shelley Billig and Janet Eyster, are “inherently multi-disciplinary, attached to both academic and civic institutions, and linked to personal development.”<sup>4</sup> Service

learning produces personal, social, and cognitive growth. The positive effects include (1) increased self-esteem; (2) exploration of new roles; (3) improved higher-level thinking skills such as problem solving and open-mindedness; and (4) greater social responsibility and concern for the welfare of others.<sup>5</sup>

## Background

This article describes a successful service-learning project (SLP) in Thailand. The participating students attended Adventist International Mission School (AIMS), located at Muak Lek, 84 miles (135 kilometers) northeast of Bangkok. AIMS is a unique blend of mission school and church school operated by Mission College under the auspices of the Southeast Asia Union Mission. Because Thai citizens want their children to become fluent in English, over the past several years, the school has grown rapidly, enrolling more than 200 students, 88 percent of whom are Buddhists,

BY PATRICIA FOSTER AND WILFRED RIEGER

mainly from relatively well-off families.

The AIMS students' SLP arose from the school's pastoral care policy and curriculum, which stress the well-being of everyone connected with the institution: students, teachers, parents, and neighbors. Initially, only Grade 4 ESL students were involved, but because of the popularity of the project, the multigrade class (Grades 5-8) also wanted to participate.

### Rationale

The Rangsit Babies' Home, a Thai government institution, was selected as the recipient partner of the students' SLP. This project was chosen because it would enhance the students' reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills, with emphasis on language arts and health. Other goals were to promote awareness and appreciation of people in need; to expose elementary students to a different social environment; to enrich the lives of others by sharing and helping on a consistent basis; to teach leadership skills and responsibility; and to develop motivation and build empathy.

### Planning Stage

During this stage, the planning team added an interested college student who joined the administrator and the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. This group met fre-

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quently to plan and discuss the project. Three home-schooled high school students were also asked to join the project. They researched the beginnings and evolutionary progress of orphanages. The Grade 4 ESL teacher, who also assisted in the home-study program, felt that involving these teenagers would decrease their isolation and improve their research and writing skills.

### Student Orientation to the Project

The ESL teacher launched the project by telling the students about orphanages. She invited them to visit the Rangsit Babies' Home on a fact-finding tour. The students and orphans interacted positively from the beginning. In addition, some of the students talked to the director of the orphanage about the operation of the institution. The director was delighted to have the students visit and invited them to return.

Initially, the students met several times a week to plan activities and to research the most urgent needs of the orphanage. They decided, after talking to the director, that the babies needed milk, toys, clothes, and books. The students' bilingual skills came in handy here. They spoke to the direc-

tor in Thai and discussed their ideas in English.

The students felt it was important to establish a rapport with the babies. To do that, they would need to visit as often as possible. Since the orphanage is 80 miles (129 kilometers) from the school and there would be transportation costs, they decided to go every other week. The teacher divided the classes into three groups. Each group would play with the babies (ages 6-23 months), help feed them, put them to bed, and then go to the cafeteria to help feed the older children (2-6 years). One group was assigned to take notes about the orphanage diet each time they visited. Another group planned playtime activities for the babies. The third group worked on fund-raising ideas. Each group kept individual journals of their visits.



### Activities

Due to the Indomilk Company's proximity to the school, the students decided to solicit milk for the orphans from this organization. The teacher chose two of the less-confident students as spokespersons: a Thai and a Malaysian. The students met with four representatives of the company to discuss their project and make their request. Since the company officials were not English-speaking, the Thai student translated for the Malaysian student. They must have done a commendable job, since the company agreed to donate milk, shirts, and toys on a regular basis.

The students decided to open a bank account. Three projects helped provide funds for the account:

1. A Songkran Festival<sup>6</sup> at school, just before the Thai national Songkran holiday. The students were divided into three groups: one to obtain donated supplies for snacks; another to cook and sell snacks; and a third to organize the water play and sell Thai toy water guns. Food and snacks were sold during the lunch period. The students raised 2,500 baht (about U.S.\$65) from their efforts.

2. The sale of mangoes. Two children negotiated to buy



## Service learning produces personal, social, and cognitive growth.

outcomes in *Profiles in Service Learning*: “students think critically and purposefully, communicate effectively, work productively with others, and act re-

sponsibly as citizens.”<sup>77</sup> The specific content areas were language arts, health, and social studies.

In *Language Arts*, the high school students researched orphanages and prepared reports on their findings. They discovered the importance of an adequate library, since they had difficulty getting information. They were, however, able to write informative reports using the books available and the Internet.

The SALTshakers club provided practice in skills such as planning, organizing, acting, and speaking, as well as critical thinking and problem solving.

After some research, the ESL and multigrade classes concluded that the business letter format was the most appropriate for requesting funds for the orphanage. Each student then composed a letter requesting donations.

The administrator asked the students to keep journals of their observations and feelings about each visit to the orphanage. These journals were shared and discussed with parents, teachers, and fellow students.

In another language activity, Thai students translated information from the handbook for the Rangsit Babies’ Home to help non-Thai participants better understand the orphanage’s objectives. They reviewed the translations to ensure good English usage. Valuable information such as the daily routine, activities, number of children adopted over the past five years, and who adopted them was included in the trans-



10 kilograms of mangoes for 50 baht a kilo and sold them for 100 baht a kilo, realizing a profit of 500 baht.

3. Donations—not only money, but also time, clothes, and toys. After the teacher discussed various types of letter writing, each student wrote a business letter requesting donations. The letters were discussed and corrected in class, then a composite letter was created with suggestions from all the students. They translated the final copy into Thai and prepared it for distribution.

The students also received a contribution of 2,000 baht that was unconnected with the letter-writing campaign.

The students researched ways to use their money most effectively. The director explained that the orphanage urgently needed more caregivers, but its funds were limited. To hire one caregiver would require 4,500 baht a month. The students decided to raise funds to pay one-fourth of a year’s salary. At that point, they had raised a total of 5,000 baht, slightly more than one-third of their goal.

One of the high school students provided impetus to the project by dedicating proceeds from “the SALTshakers,” a new clown ministry she organized and directed, to the orphanage. Coincidentally, SALT (Sharing And Loving Together) included all of the students participating in the orphanage project.

### Academic Outcomes

The administrator and ESL teacher felt that integrating reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills with activities specifically targeted for helping and interacting with the orphans would transform academic tasks into practical ones for the students.

The program’s goals are summarized well in the projected



**Initially, the students met several times a week to plan activities and to research the most urgent needs of the orphanage.**

lated pages. During subsequent discussions, students expressed their thoughts and feelings in English.

In *Health*, students learned about a healthful diet, including the essential

vitamins for healthy bodies and proper growth. After observing the menu during each visit, they evaluated the children's diet, drew conclusions, and communicated their findings.

In *Social Studies*, students who interacted with the orphans began to comprehend a variety of societal problems. Since Rangsit Babies' Home is a government institution, they learned how the Thai government provides for abandoned children and assists parents who are unable to adequately care for their children.

### Funding Sources for the Project

This project required minimal school funding.

- Students collected toys and clothes from their various communities and took them to the orphanage.

- The Indomilk Company donated milk, shirts, and toys and will continue to do so as long as AIMS is active in the orphanage project.

- Monetary donations made by companies and individuals helped pay a caregiver for a quarter of a year.

At the onset of the project, the only expense was transportation costs. This was covered by the school evangelism budget.

### Evaluation

Service learning was a new concept for AIMS. The administrator and ESL teacher assessed the impact of the experience on the students (Grade 4 ESL and Grades 5-8) through personal observations and the use of an evaluation tool. After each visit, students made entries in their journals, which revealed very positive responses. They did not want to put a time limit on the project and immersed themselves in the activities.

Although the high school students were "drafted" into

the program, they soon became enthusiastic participants. Interacting with the babies contributed to the students' personal development by improving their social skills and giving them a more positive attitude. AIMS students and staff also learned valuable lessons for future SLPs, such as the importance of action plans and ownership in relation to service-learning projects.

### Conclusion

Reflecting on the outcomes of the service-learning project, the participating adults felt that this type of education is essential to a school's pastoral care program and an important strategy to encourage altru-

ism in youth.

Integrating service into the life of students during their school years, as illustrated by the service-learning project at AIMS, is an excellent way of teaching young people to experience a living faith, and to make sharing the "Good News" a part of their education. ✍



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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For example, see Matthew 20:26-28 and Philippians 2:7, 8.
2. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 309; see also \_\_\_\_\_, *Messages to Young People* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1930), p. 168.
3. See H. Silcox, "The Need to Consider Service Learning in Developing Future Vocational Education Programs," in Carol W. Kinsley and Kate McPherson, eds., *Enriching the Curriculum Through Service Learning* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996), p. 25.
4. Shelley Billig and Janet Eyler, *Deconstructing Service Learning* (Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age Publishing, 2003), p. 259.
5. See Kinsley and McPherson, "Introduction: Changing Perceptions to Integrate Community Service Learning Into Education," in Kinsley and McPherson, pp. 5, 6.
6. This is the delightful "Water Festival," which Thai people celebrate enthusiastically.
7. Brenda Urke and Maddy Wegner, *Profiles in Service: A Handbook of Service Learning Program Design Models* (Corporation for National and Community Service, 1993).