Evidence of service learning in primary and secondary education is inconclusive

The evidence was inconclusive because too few studies reported results on the same type of outcome.

What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review examines the effects of service learning on academic success in students in primary and secondary education. The review summarises evidence from 10 studies undertaken in the USA that involved over 8,000 service learning participants in total.

School-based service learning is a teaching strategy that explicitly links community service to academic instruction. In this review, we aimed to find evidence of the effectiveness of service learning on students' academic success, personal and social skills, and risk behaviour. However, the evidence is inconclusive because of the small number of studies.

What is this review about?

Service learning is distinctive from traditional voluntarism or community service in that it intentionally connects service activities with curriculum concepts and includes structured time for reflection.

This review examines the evidence of impact of service learning on students' 'neither employed, nor in education or training' (NEET) status after compulsory schooling, academic success personal and social skills, and risk behaviour of students in primary and secondary education (from Kindergarten to Grade 12).

What studies are included?

Included studies had to examine the impact of service learning in primary and secondary education. Studies had to have a comparison group.

Thirty-seven studies analysing 30 different populations were identified. Of these, only 10 studies, analysing nine different populations, could be used in the data synthesis.

The studies were all from the USA. There were eight randomised controlled trials (RCTs) reported in nine studies and one non-randomised study. The studies contained data for over 8,000 service learning participants.

How up-to-date is this review?

The review authors searched for studies published up to October 2020.

What is the Campbell Collaboration?

Campbell is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

About this summary

What is the effect of service learning on academic success in students in primary and secondary education?

The evidence was inconclusive. The majority of studies available for meta-analysis reported on a very limited number of outcomes; in particular, few reported results on students' academic success even though the outcome was collected. At most, the results from three studies could be pooled in a single meta-analysis. Further, the majority of studies used in the meta-analyses reported implementation problems.

There was no evidence of adverse effects.

What do the findings of the review mean?

The current landscape of research on service learning in primary and secondary education (grades kindergarten to 12) in general education shows that it has yet to be evaluated thoroughly. The evidence was inconclusive because too few studies reported results on the same type of outcome.

Furthermore, all the available evidence used in the data synthesis was US-based, and so the findings may not be generalisable to other settings and systems outside the USA.

Also, the majority of studies used in the meta-analyses reported implementation problems.

These considerations point to the need for more rigorously conducted studies reporting a larger number of outcomes.

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