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Using CSL with Special Education and Reading Resource Students

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BARBARA CARTER ELLIS

During 1992, as my students and myself created a community service learning opportunity, we were introduced to the fun of researching statistics, to developing our problem-solving skills and to the complexities of geography. But most of all we, *as a team*, learned ways to improve the ways in which we worked with each other in small groups, in our classrooms and in our community.

Our experience comes out of a specific context. I am a resource room teacher for an elementary school in Staten Island, New York. I teach 20 students in the course of the day, grades 1 through 5. Each class has five students who are considered to be non-readers by the school system, meaning they were all tested to be reading two or more grade levels below average. Most of these students are accustomed to being in classroom situations where they receive minimal attention. Many students in the resource room have previously been in an English as a second language program. Some students also receive speech therapy or guidance counseling.

An ongoing goal of the class is to develop and improve students' social skills, especially the way they speak to each other. Using cooperative learning, the role of the praiser was introduced to our classroom and was practiced daily from the outset in September 1992. Positive communication means saying nice things to each other. Words such as *bonehead*, *stupid*, and *idiot*, to name a few, are not appropriate. Two years after having implemented the praiser role into the classroom, students have stopped calling each other names and using inappropriate language in school. An expectation that we would work cooperatively and use positive communication with each other was part of the integral foundation we needed in order to be effective community service learners.

GROUNDWORK FOR CSL

After attending a teacher workshop at the United Nations on the rights of children I shared a video, "That's Right," with the students. The film shows three elemen-

tary schools of diverse ethnicities and their families. One family lives in the United States, one in Canada, and one in Ghana. What impressed my resource room students was the young lady from Ghana. There were five children in her family, but only one was allowed to attend school. The young lady visually demonstrated "that she felt she was special and must do her very best."

A popular dresser, named "Hollywood" by her peers, responded, "This is terrible. Before I saw the film I thought everyone went to school. And they don't even have chairs!" I asked her if she had any ideas about what we could do to address the issue of children's rights. "No, but I will in September," she said. The students in the resource room identified with the children in the film. They saw that these were children worse off than they were and they wanted to help them. They also felt like they were in a position to help someone—for many reading resource students this is a new feeling. Our class agreed to think of ideas during summer vacation about what we could do to change the situation.

Hollywood was a strong leader. To be ready for her, I gathered a group of teachers and visited the UNICEF House in Manhattan to collect information and data on children's rights. We were amazed at the tremendous amount of free materials available to teachers and saddened by the conditions in which many young people live today. In August, I took a second group of teachers to the UNICEF House to build community knowledge about the issue of children's rights. After visiting the UNICEF House, teachers were excited about developing new lesson plans. I also attended a Star Serve workshop on Community Service Learning.

On the first day of school, Hollywood and a group of resource room students were waiting for me: "We know what we want to do. We will have a Halloween cupcake sale." I replied, "That's great—because October 31 is National UNICEF Day. But I don't cook. So you are on your own for cupcakes."

The next day, using a monthly time line, they organized their project. Calendars and time lines were a major theme the previous year. Hollywood and another stu-

dent, Michael, took over. "First, we will talk to the principal to see if its O.K. That's protocol! Then we can invite the P.T.A. president to all the resource room classes to see if its O.K. Got that! Then we can talk to our parents." A student added, "My mom loves to cook cupcakes!" Another asked the recorder, "Are you getting this Ralph?"

What I noticed was that no one needed me, although they took my suggestion that we all (parents and students) should visit UNICEF House. A second idea was to use the Star Serve model to create journals to facilitate our learning.

TIMELINES

September

Week I: Visit principal, P.T.A. Write parents.

- The Star Serve model was used to identify the problem, state our plan, and evaluate our progress. Every student had a copy. This was their journal. Students who normally refuse to write and who were assumed to be non-readers began writing in their journals right away about this project. They were not hesitant at all. The journals were fundamental to creating a successful community service project which really addressed the students' learning needs.
- We brainstormed daily, but only 10 minutes were devoted to this project. The remaining minutes was work as usual based on Individual Education Plans (IEP). The self-esteem and oral communication skills visibly expanded.
- Using the school roster, they found out the register of each class. Once they had the school population, they assigned cupcake amounts to each parent of the resource room students.
- Fearful they might run out, they also took the teacher roster to each class and made a personal appeal to teachers to donate cupcakes.

Week II: Read books about children living in different world communities. Visit school library. Visit neighborhood library.

- In order to develop their awareness about the world, I created a fun activity to teach them the basic skills of geography and to have fun. We used a large floor map of the United States, then gave an outline map to each student. The students filled in the states on their outlines as they completed the puzzle.
- We used cooperative learning strategies to help each other solve the puzzles and to complete the outlines. I found that it is a good idea to find out how much your students know about basic geography prior to beginning a project involving global issues. Before we started our project, my students believed that Staten Island was the big part of the world and every other place was small. Imagine their shock when they saw the boroughs in relation to New York State!

- Students researched information on children's rights and life situations in Somalia, Bosnia and other countries around the world. They collected data, recorded their findings, and shared their knowledge with other students. Information excited them for the first time.
- We had guest volunteers come in and talk about their experiences working in international organizations, such as the Peace Corps. We used materials from the U. S. Census Bureau and learned more geography. We had a former graduate of our school, now a lawyer, explain his role as political volunteer. We also added letter writing and learned the five parts to a letter in our language arts portfolio through our learning on this unit.

Week III: Permission slips in for UNICEF House.

October

Week I: Visit UNICEF. Action plan and thank you letters to volunteers.

- On the trip to UNICEF House, Tia Bruer, the educational guide, told the children and their parents some startling statistics. "35,000 children die daily from preventable disease." "Three million deaths have been prevented from the immunization efforts in the 1980's. That's part of the Universal Childhood Immunization Plan."

Week II: Cooperative groups (coin collectors, praiser, poster committee).

- Frequently, I gathered up the whole group of 20 students during a rainy day and practiced team-building. I asked them to try what we did with their parents! The children start off in a group, but the goal is to make a straight line behind me, alphabetically according to their first names. The fun part is that there can be no talking or writing to figure out the answers. Of course they need to know the alphabet and they can help each other. Another activity is to line up according to your birth month and day—not year. This activity strengthens calendar information and necessary personal knowledge. Most can help their parents complete information on forms if they begin to know these basics. And it is fun!
- In smaller groups of two students and one teacher, the students made posters listing three positive statements or phrases that we could use to make people feel we like them or are respectful of them. The recorder role is assigned to one student who writes them down. If the students are unable to write down the positive phrases or words, they can use a cassette recorder.
- Then we come together and share our lists. We post our signs around the room. This continues until we have enough so that anytime someone needs a positive phrase, they just have to look up! If you want to change behavior to accentuate the positive, then you need to practice this skill.

Week III: Role plays, presentation, school information (rosters).

- We carried a bucket with a 10-pound weight to feel the experiences of children around the world—where there are no sinks, toilets, and other things we take for granted. Students decided to use posters and real money to present their message to their peers.
- They made posters using positive phrases for themselves and the other students, such as, “remember to be polite.”
- Each grade was assigned a special duty for October 31. Fifth graders carried the UNICEF container and handled money. Fourth graders carried signs, maps, and pictures. Third graders were the coin and bill counters. First and second graders thanked each class in turn.
- Pairs of students went to each classroom presenting the information about their project and why it was important to participate. Making these presentations was a big step for most of these students who had become used to being ostracized in the classroom. Presentations were made to all 300 students.

Week IV: Accent on mathematics.

- Due to the very high crime rate, most children rarely went to stores or purchased anything. Their knowledge of money value was limited. This hurt them on the citywide test because there are always at least three coin identification questions and one problem solving question involving money.
- Rolling coins was an immediate success—plus it led to activities like using a chart. For example, how many pennies for one wrapper? For two wrappers? Next it helped develop eye-hand coordination. Finally, it brought for a girl who became an expert at rolling coins, success as a leader.

October 31 at 2 P.M.: The students visited each classroom with the cupcakes, the P.T.A. president and yours truly. By 2:45 we raised over \$60 (someone was estimating), but we were out of cupcakes. “*What shall we do?*” an alarmed Mrs. Ellis asked. “*Well you know what they say,*” said a student. I couldn’t remember so I gave an apprehensive, “*What do they say?*” “*You have to spend money to earn money.*” That meant buy more cupcakes with our money and sell them during the same time—and the rest is history! \$74.50—I made it \$75.

ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTION

Students developed portfolios which included CSL activities. Teachers liked that idea. It gave them an idea of their positive skills. They evaluated their progress and talked about ways to improve oral communication skills.

I noticed more heads up, fewer shoulders slumped. I heard many positive comments from my colleagues about students they remembered from earlier grades and how marvelous it was to see them more confident. I noticed an increase in their vocabulary. Their use of multisyllable words grew tremendously as they learned to recognize, pronounce, and use them in health, math, and geography. The students changed their attitudes from individualism to focusing on the group—“We” replaced “Me.”

Most of all, parents were proud to be involved. They also kept journals and met with the P.T.A. According to the P.T.A. president, membership improved.

Community service learning opened doors for incredible growth—giant steps in learning for everyone. It was hard work, but it was worth it. Consider CSL an ongoing process. I started with a phone call from a close friend at UNICEF that eventually led to a workshop—which introduced me to another friend at the U.S. Census Bureau and to volunteers in the Peace Corps, to *National Geographic* and great geography materials. Each event allowed me to share with others, and I hoped they would do the same.

For the children it meant hearing someone else—not just me presenting ideas for them to use and to solve problems creatively. The real challenge was to present materials in an exciting way so that students can involve their peers and their parents and grow toward becoming better informed citizens and thus better community leaders. When educators become disseminators, everybody grows.

Barbara Carter Ellis is a reading resource room teacher at P.S. 14 on Staten Island, New York. She is also the Parent Involvement Coordinator for Title VII projects in New York City, serves on the board for IMPACT II, a nonprofit national networking organization for teachers, and is on the Advisory Board for Star Serve.