Abundant Beautification

An Effective Service-Learning Project for Students With Emotional or Behavioral Disorders

Laura M. Frey

- Can service learning provide a structure for students to access skills that will transition into future community living success?
- Can students with emotional or behavioral disorders work successfully with a community-based partner to implement projects that meet community needs?
- Can these students realize the connection between community needs and their classroom academic activities?
- Can students with emotional or behavioral disorders develop a sense of caring not only for themselves, but for others?

Read this article to find answers to these questions regarding the efficacy of service learning for students with emotional or behavioral disorders (see box, "What Does the Literature Say?"). Given the educational needs of such students, service learning appears to be a viable structure to pursue in the provision of best-practice programming.

A Successful Service-Learning Project

My colleagues and I designed this project to explore the benefits of service learning for students with emotional or behavioral disorders. We proposed three project outcomes:
- Increase in school attendance.
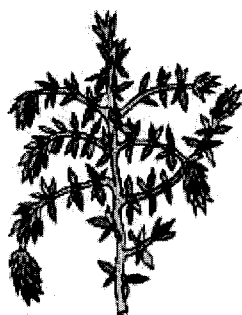
- Increase in positive display of student target behaviors at the conclusion of the project and academic school year.
- Experience successful completion of service-learning project (defined as completion of ground beautification activities on the community project site).

We initiated this service-learning project as a result of a federally-funded grant through Learn and Serve America, sponsored by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. This project was implemented at the Therapeutic Learning Center (TLC), a special education day treatment program for students with emotional or behavioral disorders. I was program coordinator at TLC and project investigator at the time of project implementation.

Project and Setting Overview

The students at TLC were in need of more intensive interventions for social

and emotional issues than were available in special education programs in less restrictive environments. This program served students in middle school and high school (approximately age 12 through age 21). Throughout the school year, a total of 14 students at TLC participated in service learning. Table 1 provides a summary of student demographic information. Because it was an exploration project, we implemented a quasi-experimental design to determine its effects. This project had a two-part design, consisting of project implementation structure and data collection structure, as follows:
- The project structure integrated the service-learning cycle into the three stages of (a) project preparation and implementation, (b) integrated classroom activities, and (c) reflection and celebration.
- The data collection structure consisted of both quantitative and qualitative data for (a) student behavior, (b)

Students established relationships with senior citizens and worked with them in grounds beautification projects.

An evolving literature base has demonstrated the positive effect that service learning can have for students with emotional or behavioral disorders (Emery & Richardson, 1996; Frey, 1999, 2001; McCarty & Hazelkorn, 2001; Murry, 2001; Muscott, 2001; Muscott & O'Brien, 1999; Rockwell, 1999, 2001; Tochterman, 2001; Wood, 2001).

Students with emotional or behavioral disorders face many intrapersonal and interpersonal skill challenges on the path to successful citizenship (Forness & Kavale, 2000; Quinn et al., 2000). Service learning facilitates the acquisition and generalization of skills necessary for successful community integration (Billig, 2000; Des Marais, Yang, & Farzanehkia, 2000; Kielsmeier, 2000; Kinsley & McPherson, 1995; Melchior, 1997; Yoder, Retish, & Wade, 1996). The service-learning philosophy of community-based activities integrated with classroom academics and reflection is a promising educational component for students with such disorders to develop intrapersonal and interpersonal skills necessary for future life success.

Armstrong (1993, 1994, 2000) has extensively explained the skills of intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence.

- *Intrapersonal skills* include the ability to access one's own feelings, discriminate between many different kinds of inner emotional states and use self-understanding to enrich and guide one's life.
- *Interpersonal skills* include the ability to understand and work with people. This includes the capacity to perceive and be responsive to moods, temperaments, and intentions of others.

With service learning as an education component, students with emotional or behavioral disorders can develop the social/emotional skills of understanding self and others simultaneously in the community and the classroom.

programwide information, and (c) summative project evaluations.

Project Structure

Preparation and Implementation

As a result of brainstorming activities to identify a project, students and staff identified grounds beautification as a community need. With support of a local not-for-profit agency, the students established a relationship with the management of a local senior citizens apartment complex to beautify the grounds of the complex. This project would include the grounds surrounding the complex's community center, along with personal gardens of resident senior citizens.

Students visited with the apartment complex manager and TLC staff to plan the specifics of grounds beautification. Students measured the community center area for shrubbery space, developed architectural plans, and drew landscape designs. They also met with a local nursery owner, made decisions on shrubbery types, developed a budget, and made necessary purchases for the

Table 1. Demographic Information on Students Involved in Service-Learning Project

Student	Gender	Grade	IQ	DSM-IV	Ethnicity
Student A	M	6th	Avg.	ODD, ADHD	C
Student B	M	6th	Avg.	none	AA
Student C	M	6th	Avg.	none	AA
Student D	M	7th	Avg.	ODD, ADHD	C
Student E	F	7th	Avg.	none	C
Student F	M	8th	Avg.	ODD, ADHD	AA
Student G	M	9th	Avg.	ODD	AA
Student H	F	9th	Avg.	none	C
Student I	M	10th	Avg.	ADHD	AA
Student J	M	10th	Avg.	ODD, ADHD, OCD	C
Student K	M	11th	Avg.	CD	AA
Student L	M	11th	Avg.	none	C
Student M	M	11th	Avg.	none	C
Student N	M	12th	Gifted	Depression, OCD, ADHD	AA

Notes:
Ethnicity: C = Caucasian; AA = African American

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed. (DSM-IV):ODD = Oppositional Defiant Disorder; OCD = Obsessive Compulsive Disorder; ADHD = Attention-deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; CD = Conduct Disorder.

The program included a 54-week instructional timeframe.

project. Figure 1 provides an outline of the completed service-learning project plan.

Throughout the service-learning project, we made no differentiation in regard to activities or responsibilities of middle school versus high school students from TLC who went to the senior apartment center site. Students made weekly visits to the senior center, where they cleared unkempt areas, raked leaves, distributed mulch, and planted bushes. During these visits, students also established relationships with senior citizens and made inquiries regarding future complex and resident needs for garden beautification. Students sought out residents who wanted help with individual gardens.

The middle school TLC students initiated a classroom-based activity to build two benches for the community center of the complex. The initial ground beautification project was completed before the winter holidays. The middle school students completed this project and donated the benches to the center during the service-learning project's winter celebration.

During the winter months, students made weekly visits to residents and ran errands to the store for those senior citizens who were unable to get out into the community. In addition, they planted seedlings and grew them in the classroom for spring planting at the senior citizens center.

Integrated Classroom Activities

Teachers integrated the service-learning projects into classroom academics. The classroom instruction included both academic and social-emotional learning in various subject areas: science, social studies, math, English, and affective education.

- Science topics included plant types, plant care, and soil types.
- Social studies topics included citizenship, community planning, and civic responsibility.
- Math lessons ranged from pricing project needs to measuring and drawing sketches of grounds beautification areas.

- In English, students wrote thank-you notes, prepared informational flyers, and completed journal entries.
- In affective education, students learned about teambuilding, accepting differences, caring for self, and reflection.

Figure 2 shows an example of an integrated academic lesson.

Reflection and Celebration

We regularly encouraged reflection to enhance students' creative and critical thinking skills. Through reflection, students gained insight regarding the effect of the service-learning experience on individual and team growth. Staff facilitated a reflection activity following each community outing. This consisted of a seatwork activity that prompted the students to review on how the activity helped them to care for others, what individual accomplishments they experienced, and how they felt about themselves and the activity. In addition, staff facilitated a brief group processing of the team accomplishments during the community outing.

Celebration was an equally vital component of the service-learning process. The first grounds beautification project culminated with a celebration at the community center of the senior citizen complex. Celebration participants included senior citizens, TLC students and staff, school board members, and school district central office administrative staff. During this celebration, the two homemade benches were presented to the senior citizens as a surprise gift.

Data Collection

Quantitative Data

We collected student data as a part of the TLC program evaluation. We included data from the winter and spring semester of the preceding school year, as well as the academic school year of the service-learning project. The effect

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Celebration was a vital component of the service-learning process.

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of the service-learning project on the TLC setting was based on a review of data from winter semester of the preceding school year to spring semester of the year of project completion (a total of 6 academic quarters or 54 weeks of school). The number of students in the TLC setting for whom we collected data ranged from 12 to 16, depending on the program enrollment. All students were provided access to the service-learning project, with the option to participate.

Program data collection was an ongoing evaluation component even before the implementation of the service-learning project. For the purposes of the service-learning project, we also used data to assess the effect of service learning on the entire day treatment program. TLC collected student data in the areas of (a) student attendance, (b) student reintegration, (c) out-of-school suspensions, (d) safe school violations, (e) student grades, (f) student incident reports to program coordinator, (g) administrative and/or re-think processing conferences, (h) student profanity/obscenity, (i) student rule noncompliance, (j) student intimidation/threats, and (k) student vandalism.

Qualitative Data

We collected student qualitative data as part of the service-learning project evaluation. The effect of the service-learning project on students was based on their participation in activities within the senior citizens grounds beautification project. We organized the evaluation of this effect into the "Service-Learning Student Survey" (Figure 3).

To accommodate individual needs and maximize breadth and depth of the responses, the service-learning project director read and recorded responses on an individual student basis. Students responded to questions that sought their perception of the service-learning experience in regard to

- What they learned about helping others.
- What they enjoyed most.
- Classroom activities that helped them most.
- Their opinion about school, themselves, and peers as a result of the service-learning project.

Figure 1. Completed Service-Learning Planning Instrument for the Ground Beautification Project

Service-Learning Grant: Ground Beautification
Community Need: Support to Aging Population and Environment Assistance
Community-Based Partner: Residents at Senior Apartments
Service-Learning Project Site: Senior Citizens Apartment Complex

I. Project Outcomes:
1. The students will demonstrate support for the concept of service learning.
2. The students will develop relationships with the apartment residents while completing a ground beautification project.
3. The students will demonstrate an understanding of citizenship and its responsibilities.

II. Community Site Project Preparations for Ground Beautification

Project Components	Project Participants	Safety Issues	Equipment Needs
Leaf-raking	10-15 students	Proper tool use	Equipment containers
Mulching	3 teachers	Transporting students	Flower pots, Plants
Bulb planting	3 instructional assistants	Staff communication	Shovels, Rakes, Hose
Mums	1 program therapist	Student readiness	Garbage bags
Ground sketches	1 program coordinator	First aid	Camera, Film, Camcorder
Measurement preplanning	Program volunteers	Restroom use/supervision	Photo album, Scrapbook
	Apartment manager	Resident's privacy	Folders for project time logs

III. Preparations for Academic Integration With Service-Learning Project

Subjects to Integrate With Project	Lesson Topics	Classroom Curriculum Needs
Science	Plant types, plant care, soil types, fertilization	Gardening materials
Social studies	Citizenship & responsibilities, communities	Citizenship materials
Math	Measuring planting area, pricing items, drawing draft sketches of planting area	Measurement instruments, ads, pricing materials, calculators
English	Develop surveys for residents	Computer printing program
	Write thank-you notes for resident support	Computer access
	Develop flyers to put up at senior apartments	English for daily living text
	Reading, job application practice	Literature on elderly
Affective education	Teambuilding, getting along	Bibliotherapy: caring for others,
	Recognizing differences, building self-respect, self-reflection	getting along and working with the elderly, getting along with peers, journals, social skills curriculum

IV. Lens of the Project Preparations: Issues to Consider

Students' Lens	Teaching Staff Lens	Parents' Lens	Residents' Lens
Outdoor work, getting dirty	Curriculum integration	Safety	Safety
Issues with elderly	District reputation	Time on academics	Feelings of privacy invasion
What is in it for me?	Residents' safety	Liability	Concerns regarding youth
Snack, beverages	Transportation safety	Supervision	Personal needs

School District Central Office Lens	State Grant Funding Agency Lens
District reputation, district liability	Grant funding guidelines
Purchase order and paperwork procedures	Grant implementation guidelines/procedures
Meeting curriculum needs and IEP requirements	Grant recordkeeping

Note: IEP = individualized education program.

Figure 1. (Continued)

Service-Learning Grant: Ground Beautification
Community Need: Support to Aging Population and Environment Assistance
Community-Based Partner: Residents at Senior Apartments
Service-Learning Project Site: Senior Citizens Apartment Complex

V. Student Readiness Preparations for the Community Involvement
1. Student demonstrates "Following Directions," "Accepting Feedback," and "Accepting No for Answer"
2. Student completes service learning overview and orientation.
3. Student signs commitment-to-participate contract. Parent signs agreement contract.
4. Student completes one community visit that is not located at senior apartments.
5. Student completes first site visit on senior apartment complex grounds.
6. Student completes a reflection activity after first visit.
7. Student completes second site visit, taking ground sketches.
8. Student begins service learning participation log.

VI. Project Success Indicators
Positive completion of project
Positive senior resident satisfaction
Positive student satisfaction
Positive teacher satisfaction
Positive central office satisfaction
Positive parent satisfaction
Positive student citizenship knowledge

VII. Service-Learning Project Reflection and Celebration

Postsite Visit Reflection Process
Students go to conference room.
Complete seatwork reflection sheet
a. Reflect on caring for others
b. Reflect on individual accomplishment/feelings
c. Reflect on teamwork accomplishment
d. Program staff lead group processing

Project Closure Reflection
Postproject reflection activity
What difference have I made?
What have I learned about myself?
What have I learned about others?
What academic skills did I learn?

Project Celebrations
Classroom activities for students
First-quarter classroom celebration
Community open house

VIII. Service-Learning Tasks: Timeline Preparations—Begin Project by October 15

Staff/Timeline
TLC staff, September 1

Community Partner/Timeline
Senior apartment, September 15

Students/Timeline
TLC students, October 1

- Advice for other students and teachers in regard to service learning.
- Their perception of citizenship.
- The effect of service learning on future plans.
- Miscellaneous comments.

Results

The students successfully completed grounds beautification activities on the site of the senior citizens center, as planned, during the course of implementation of this project. Students, staff, and community members held a celebration at the senior center to conclude this successful project. The TLC staff considered this to be a programwide team effort and included all students.

Table 2 reviews the programwide data. This review indicates that the pro-

ject's three outcome goals were realized: (a) an increase in school attendance, (b) an increase in positive display of student target behaviors at the conclusion of the project and academic school year, and (c) successful completion of service-learning project.

In the area of school attendance, the groups of students reporting 0-5 and 6-10 days of absence improved from the beginning to the end of the project. In the area of display of rule-following behavior, decreases were reported in out-of-school suspensions, safe school violations, incident reports to program coordinator, number of re-think processing conferences, profanity/obscenity occurrences, rule noncompliance reports, intimidation/physical threats, and vandalism.

Figure 4 presents a review of the students' perception on the service-learning project. Overall students responded positively to questions that sought their perception of the service-learning experience. In general, students reported

A great result: Many students who held previously negative opinions about school, themselves, and working with others, were now much more positive about each of these areas.

Figure 2. Lesson Plan: Affective Education and Service Learning

Advance Organizer and Lesson Objective:
This is the first in a series of lessons to help us learn to learn how we look at differences and how we can learn better responses to differences in people. This information will be used to help all of us learn to get along better in class, on our service-learning project, and in day-to-day life. The students will be expected to
• Follow along.
• Participate.
• Work cooperatively together.
• Complete an information chart on dealing with differences with 90% accuracy.

Instructional Activities:
The teacher will write the word "Different" on the board with the dictionary definition. Following this the teacher will write in a column next to it "People Differences."
• First, the teacher will guide the students to give input in a variety of ways that people are different (age, hair color, eye color, gender, skin color, viewpoints, political affiliation, clothes, intelligence, etc).
• Second, the teacher will add a column on the ways people can react to the differences (make fun of, call names, put down, give a compliment, ignore, etc.). The teacher will elicit student input and make it clear that all answers are welcome at this point.
• Third, the teacher will add a column on consequences of the reactions or responses given in the preceding column. The teacher will elicit student input.
• Fourth, the teacher will add a column on positive ways to respond to the differences. Student input will again be encouraged.

Demonstration of New Material:
The teacher will show the interconnectedness of the information on the board, walking back through the definition of difference and reviewing each column to highlight the consequences of the negative responses to differences. The teacher will lead students into an independent work activity where they list
• The differences among themselves.
• The differences they have compared to the senior citizens at the apartment complex.
• Positive responses to the differences.

Check for Understanding:
The teacher will pose questions to the students related to: the meaning of the word differences, the many ways individuals are different, the specific ways they are different from each other in class, and the ways they are different from the elderly people they are working with. If there is a lack of clarity, the teacher will go back and review from the instructional activities and the demonstration.

Independent Practice:
The students will work in pairs to complete a chart that includes
• Ways they are different from peers in the class.
• Ways they are different from the elderly people in the service-learning project.
• Positive ways to react/respond to these differences.
• Consequences of the positive response.
The teacher will circulate in the classroom to facilitate the activity and provide clarification.

End of Lesson Review and Closure:
The teacher will lead a lesson review and closure by reviewing the purpose of this lesson, recapping differences, behavior responses, and consequences. In addition the teacher will review the link to the current service-learning project. The teacher will start an advance organizer for future activities that will involve students developing a tips sheet for dealing with differences in a positive way. This can lead to developing a skit, videotaping, and also teaching others how to deal with differences in a positive way.

Figure 3. Service-Learning Student Survey

Name: _____ Grade: _____

Each survey question was read aloud to the student, and the interviewer wrote the student answer.

1. What have you learned about helping other people from your work in the service-learning project at the Therapeutic Learning Center (TLC)?

2. What have you enjoyed most about the service-learning activities?

3. Name some classroom activities that have helped you when you go out on the service-learning activities.

4. Has your opinion changed about school with your work in service learning? How?

5. Has your opinion changed about yourself with your work in service learning? How?

6. Has your opinion changed about working with classmates with your work in service learning? How?

7. Has your opinion changed about working with people in the community with your work in service learning? How?

8. What advice would you give other students who are just starting service learning?

9. What advice would you give teachers who are considering service learning for their classes?

10. What does being a citizen now mean to you?

11. How can service learning help you with your future success and plans?

12. Comments/Recommendations:

that they had learned how good it felt to work with others. They enjoyed the opportunity to get out of the classroom as part of the service-learning experience. Many students who held previously negative opinions about school, themselves, and working with others, were now much more positive about each of these areas. The students had positive suggestions for both teachers and students to continue service learning and make the most of the experience. They also offered optimism for what a service-learning experience can do for their future.

Challenges and Outcomes

During project development, in the forefront of the anticipated service-learning activities was the fact that students with emotional or behavioral disorders face many interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges in their day-to-day efforts to experience success. On the "Service-Learning Student Survey" students responded positively across several questions in regard to the effect of the service-learning project on what they

have learned about themselves, their peers, school, citizenship, and their future. Though not conclusive, the service-learning experience appears to have been a catalyst for positive progress on the questions we raised at the beginning.

The qualitative feedback of the students, in addition to quantitative program data, suggest that the service-learning experience addressed intrapersonal and interpersonal skills for students with emotional or behavioral disorders. This finding indicates that the service-learning experience has had a positive effect on students' ability to have self-understanding and examine inner emotional states, key components of healthy intrapersonal functioning.

In addition, we found that the service-learning experience had a positive effect on students' ability to understand and work with others, key components of healthy interpersonal functioning. Much of the success for all students is their improved ability to display socially accepted behaviors in the school environment.

At the conclusion of the service-learning project, an overall program noted improvement in the areas of out-of-school suspensions, safe school violations, incident reports to program coordinator, number of re-think processing conferences, profanity/obscenity occurrences, rule noncompliance reports, intimidation/physical threats, and vandalism. This improvement has occurred as result of positive internal change occurring for students with emotional or behavioral disorders—in the way they deal with their own thoughts and feelings and in the ways they deal with the feelings and actions of others.

Much of the success for all students is their improved ability to display socially accepted behaviors in the school environment.

Table 2. Programwide Data Taken During Service-Learning Project

Date Area	Winter	Fall	Spring	Comments
# Students Absent 0-5 days	8	12	10	Increase
# Students Absent 6-10 days	7	1	6	Decrease
# Out-of-School Suspensions	15	12	4	Decrease
# Safe School Violations	25	20	8	Decrease
Students 100% Passing Grades	90%	52%	66%	Decrease
# Incident Reports	55	59	22	Decrease
# Administrative Conferences/# Re-think Processing Conferences	76	69	13	Decrease
Profanity/ Obscenity Reports	38	39	16	Decrease
Rule Noncompliance Reports	66	47	22	Decrease
Intimidation/Physical Threat Reports	56	47	7	Decrease
Vandalism Reports	8	3	0	Decrease

Note: The program included a 54-week instructional timeframe.

Implications and Further Research

Results of this project could influence future programming for students with emotional or behavioral disorders by expanding the range of instructional strategies and program components. A number of future areas of research will have implications for programming and education success for the population of students with emotional or behavioral disorders. The following are some areas of recommended research:

1. The results of this service-learning project indicate a need to look beyond traditional avenues of data collection (attendance, out-of-school suspension, incident reports) to the acquisition of improved skills for successful community involvement, that is, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. A quantifiable structure for monitoring intrapersonal and interpersonal development is needed.

2. This service-learning project (structure, intent, and results) offers opportunities to move forward with research in programming practices for all K-12 level students with emotional or behavioral disorders. Specific programming components include student skills in reflection, critical thinking, citizenship, and teambuilding.

3. Preservice and inservice educators can use research on the projects' results and structure to initiate dialogue for teacher preparation programs to include practices like service learning within course content. Preparing future teachers with skills and knowledge in how to access the community for learning and how to effectively integrate classroom instruction with community learning is a valuable research area.

Final Thoughts

Access to successful community involvement is not an insurmountable task for this student population. Service learning is a promising program component that links classroom academics with community projects and reflection to enhance individual student skills while strengthening an entire educational program. As a result of the service-learning experience, students with emotional or behavioral disorders can enhance intrapersonal and interpersonal skills that often impede their learning success.

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Figure 4. Sample Student Feedback on Service-Learning Student Survey

What have you learned about helping other people from your work in the service-learning project at the Therapeutic Learning Center (TLC)?

- It is better than getting in trouble. It is nice. I felt proud of myself. I learned people are nice.
- The people appreciate what we did. They were happy on how it turned out. I learned all the steps to go through to prepare for serve [serving] and learning. I learned the people were open to us.
- It is good to help other people. It makes them feel good and me. I've learned I am not good with older people because I don't know what to say, but I am good with younger.
- If you keep them, they can probably help you out. People are pretty easy to work with. I enjoy working with people.
- When you help others, they help you. I feel good when I help others. I feel more comfortable around older people.
- I learned that helping others is a good thing and it will all pay off at some point in time. Sometimes the payoff is the future.
- I've learned to help others. I've learned to get in the community more. I learned that people like the help, it is easy, it made me feel good.
- Work together and sticking together. It helps others. I learned I enjoyed helping others. The people are easy to help.

What advice would you give other students who are just starting service learning?

- Be proud of yourself, use manners, be respectful, try service learning because it is interesting.
- Try it, just do your best. There is nothing you can fail at in doing it, you spend time with people.
- Have fun with it. It is worth it. Because it makes you feel good about yourself.
- It's fun, you work together, you learn stuff. Give it a try.
- Being a part of the group and community.
- Keep on going with it, you'll want someone to be there for you.
- Try to see if you like it. Try it before you judge it.
- Get along with the people and give it a try. There is something you can learn. You can reach something you've never reached before.

How can service learning help you with your future success and plans?

- By helping people you are being good and this will help to get a good job. Less profanity, get along with people.
- If I go somewhere where they can do this, I will already know exactly what to do. It hasn't really helped with skills or behaviors.
- It will get you motivated. It can help you learn what you are good at or not good at.
- It don't help.
- When I grow up I want to work with little kids and service learning can help me learn the capabilities to work with kids. I can learn to improve my behavior and be a role model.

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