

1996

## Service Learning: Meeting Student and Community Needs

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### Recommended Citation

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**Imagine** students turning the tables—giving service to others instead of always being on the receiving end of services.

**Imagine** students learning in a school-without-walls—except the walls and corridors and gardens of community-based sites where elderly people live or little children play.

**Imagine** students with disabilities getting excited about possible careers and polishing their “people” skills in the process.

**Imagine** kids using math and English and social studies in the “real world.”

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# Service Learning: Meeting Student and Community Needs

**T**his article describes a program through which students with learning disabilities and culturally diverse backgrounds, and their peers in the general education program, demonstrated their abilities to be service providers to many people within their community.

In this program—called service learning—we expanded the existing school-based curriculum and gave students the opportunity to work collaboratively with peers, younger students, and senior citizens (see box, “A Rationale for Service Learning”). *Through their service activities, our students were able to practice appropriate communication and social skills across age levels in natural settings.* Responses to questionnaires and interviews revealed increased social skills and self-esteem. Students were seen as helping, caring, role models by younger students, and as sensitive adolescents by senior citizens.

## Beginning the Service-Learning Program

The need for increased interaction with peers and appropriate communication skills became apparent to several teachers shortly after the new school year began. The resource teacher noticed a

lack of motivation and inadequate social skills on the part of some students. At the same time, the English-as-a-second language (ESL) teacher felt that there was a need for her students to practice English language skills in a variety of settings. Both teachers believed their students would benefit from using communication, reading, writing, and social skills while working with a variety of individuals.

**Participants.** As a result of collaboration among several teachers, we formed a heterogeneous group of 24 seventh- and eighth-grade students interested in service learning:

- All students enrolled in the resource program were invited to participate.
- The ESL teacher selected students based on their need for oral and written English-language practice within the community.
- Students enrolled in the general education study hall during class periods when the program would take place were asked to participate on a random basis.

Our service-learning group comprised 6 students with learning disabilities, 6 students enrolled in an ESL course, and 12 students without disabilities enrolled in the general education program.

**Assistants.** To help supervise students at

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the sites, we obtained the assistance of two university students enrolled in a social studies methods course and one student enrolled in the leisure studies program at the University of Iowa. These students assisted with the program while fulfilling practicum requirements. They helped coordinate student training sessions, accompanied students to and from the service-learning sites, and supervised students during daily service-learning activities.

**Community Sites.** We contacted a local retirement center and K-6 teachers in an adjacent elementary



**Students benefit from community service by increasing their self-esteem, self-knowledge, and communication and social skills.**

**FIGURE 1**

**Questions for Prospective Service-Learning Agency Personnel**

1. Who is the key contact person?
2. Who does your agency serve?
3. What are the needs and concerns of your agency?
4. Would you be interested in having junior high school students help to meet some of these needs?
5. What limitations are there in regard to time, schedules, and health concerns?
6. How many students would you be able to accommodate?
7. What are your expectations for volunteers?
8. How should we prepare students for this experience?
9. What is the level of commitment for training, supervising, and evaluating students provided by your staff?
10. Is publicity permissible?

school to determine if they would be interested in collaborating on service-learning projects. In choosing the service sites, we considered factors such as proximity to the school, age appropriateness of activities, the agency's and students' willingness to participate in the program, and scheduling. Figure 1 provides a list of questions we found useful when contacting agencies.

**Orientation and Training.** All students participated in tours of the retirement center and elementary school, and then selected one of the two sites to carry out their service-learning projects. We held three 20-minute training sessions, conducted by the resource and ESL teachers, the school district volunteer coordinator, and two university practicum students before first period on 3 consecutive days. We discussed issues such as signing in and out of the junior high and service sites, behaving appropriately at the service sites, and carrying out responsibilities associated with the service-learning activities. Discussion included the need to be prompt, be courteous, and use appropriate language. Students were also informed about the need to be quiet on arrival and complete tasks requested by the elementary teacher or care center staff before beginning activities that they had planned.

**Learning from Service**

**Projects and Schedules.** Students who worked at the retirement center were able

to choose from a variety of tasks, including reading or writing letters, talking, and playing cards or board games. At the elementary school, students were placed in classrooms after considering the tasks requested by the cooperating teachers, their reading and language abilities, and their preference for age group. They read to younger students, played language and board games, answered sixth-graders' questions about junior high school, and tutored in math. Students walked to their respective sites with either a project teacher or a university student. They carried out their project during study halls or selected class times that were 45 minutes long for a minimum of two times a week for 6 weeks.

**Reflection Time.** Throughout the program, students met with the resource and ESL teachers to reflect on their activities and make plans for their next visit. They also discussed their experiences with the university practicum students as they walked to and from the sites. Group review and planning sessions were held after school, and individual students met daily with the program teachers. Students discussed their project, what they planned to do in the future, and what changes they would make, if any. Students regularly wrote in their journals regarding their experiences. They also gave oral feedback and incorporated experiences into written stories. Links to the curriculum were made as students prac-

FIGURE 2

### Questions for Student Reflection After Service-Learning Experience

1. How did your last service-learning activity go?
2. What was good about it?
3. What problems did you encounter?
4. What, if anything, would you change?
5. What could you do differently?
6. What do you plan to do next time?
7. How are you going to prepare?
8. What would you like to share with your peers about this project?

ticed their reading and oral language skills with young children, kept journals about their activities, and reviewed math facts with elementary students. Figure 2 provides a list of questions that we used for guiding student reflection on service activities.

#### Meeting Challenges

An important component of this program was the coordination of schedules. The university practicum students were available during limited hours, and teachers had little free time during the day to work on programs that were not a part of their regular schedules. In addition, we also had to coordinate the class and extracurricular schedules of the junior high students in scheduling training sessions and time for group reflection. Scheduling conflicts often made it difficult to meet with every student on a daily basis and to involve all students in the group reflection sessions. Although all students did not meet in groups, they did meet with a

teacher or university practicum student at least twice a week to reflect on their activities and feelings.

Another challenge involved reminding some students that they had made a commitment and that despite waning interest or impending homework, they must follow through. Despite these difficulties, the time and energy spent were well worth the efforts.

#### Counting the Benefits of Service Increased Self-Esteem.

The value of the service-learning activities is most evident in the benefits to individual students. For example, Bob was a reluctant, yet curious student. He was hesitant to become involved in the service-learning project at its inception. With encouragement, he decided to go on the tour and see what service learning was all about. After the tour, he stated that he would like to work with "little kids," but because of past experiences and feelings of failure, was hesitant to go back to his former elementary school. With teacher support, he began his service-learning project, reading to a first-grade student. As the project continued, he became more comfortable and was asked by elementary teachers to speak to students about adjusting to junior high school. In reflecting on his experiences, he stated that he learned he "could read." He felt better about himself and spoke with pride about his new role.

**Increased Self-Knowledge.** A questionnaire revealed that many students learned a great deal about themselves and serving others. In response to the question, "What did you learn about service?" Diane expressed surprise "that something so easy can make somebody happy," and Mary felt that she learned time management. Vong commented that he realized he liked children, but did not like to teach them, while Jeff found that through cross-age tutoring he had a chance to work with someone who looked up to him.

**Increased Communication, Problem-Solving, and Social Skills.** After their ser-

vice-learning experiences, our students seemed more self-assured and displayed skills and talents that are not typically apparent in our classrooms. For example, students exhibited patience, understanding, and functional problem-solving skills. As they assisted elementary students with a variety of assignments, students also developed skills in relating to the very young and the elderly. Sarah noted, "I got more self-confidence," and Kari stated that "it's really fun and makes you feel a little bit better about yourself." Students became aware of their role as active citizens and service providers. As they engaged in problem-solving, they were able to come up with complex solutions for a variety of social issues. One group of students proposed a number of options regarding care for the elderly that incorporated societal and cultural limitations and norms.

All participating students learned that it was necessary to prepare ahead of time for their activities and bring necessary materials. Students put plans into action, and they experienced the benefits and pleasures of collaborating with others to meet a variety of needs. We observed increased communication skills and the development of friendships with community members, as well as peers who were also involved in the service-learning project.

#### Achieving Closure or Continuation

Ending the service-learning projects was difficult for many students. They enjoyed the time that they had spent with the elementary students and residents of the retirement center. At the request of the students, we extended a few projects beyond the original time line. When projects ended, students gave mementos to the people with whom they had worked and thanked them for their participation. Cindy and Lisa continued their community service by volunteering at another residential care center and a local hospi-

## A Rationale for Service Learning for Students with Disabilities

Students who are considered to be at risk due to learning or behavior disabilities, low socioeconomic status, or linguistically diverse backgrounds are often the recipients of services within the school and community (Morris, 1992; Omark & Erickson, 1983; Schloss, Smith, & Schloss, 1990). While it is essential for these students to receive support services, we believe that students with disabilities are important resources for their community. We have seen firsthand that students with disabilities or other special needs can develop their personal, social, and academic skills through the process of making valuable contributions to others.

Programs that link schools to the community have recently increased in number (Eberly, 1993). Involvement in the community heightens students' awareness of local needs and concerns and allows them to become active in a positive, productive manner. In some programs, students are given the opportunity to study their community, note problems, identify their skills and talents, and develop projects that put their ideas into practice (Townsend, 1993). *Students can explore a variety of careers, learn about themselves and society, begin to make the connection between school and the "real world," and meet a variety of community needs.*

One of the most promising approaches for linking schools with their communities is service learning. Ser-

vice learning is the integration of community service with academic skills and structured reflection (Cairn & Kielsmeier, 1991). Service learning can involve personal contact, for example, when students assist elderly people in household and yard chores, or indirect contact as they raise funds and donate money to a homeless shelter. Students learn about the world of work, explore career options, and learn to develop communication skills through activities that link the existing school curriculum with civic action (Schine, 1990). Service learning is an effective method for a variety of students because it "engages multiple senses and kinds of intelligence, making learning more accessible" (McPherson & Nebgen, 1991, p. 328). Students who may achieve better through real situations than abstractions, and those who benefit from learning environments that involve a variety of people may benefit from service learning opportunities (McPherson & Nebgen).

*Through service learning, students gain confidence in their skills and develop a sense of pride and belonging in the community* (Conrad & Hedin, 1991). These are especially important benefits for students with learning disabilities, who frequently display lower self-esteem and problematic peer status when compared to students without disabilities (LaGreca & Stone, 1990). Interpersonal relationships are the most meaningful roles for young adolescents, and working with the very young or the aging bolsters self-esteem by giving students "the knowledge that they are valued and do, indeed, 'make a difference'" (Schine, 1990, p. 8).

tal. Raphael noted that he enjoyed working with small children, and would like to work with elderly people in the future to compare the two experiences. Many students expressed the desire to be involved in a similar school project again.

### Extending Learning and Making Connections

Engaging students in civic action within their community takes extra time and effort on the part of teachers, but more than pays off with a multitude of benefits to all. Teachers learn more about their students' strengths, and the community is aided by people who help identify problems and contribute time, skills, and

energy to solve them. Service learning provides an opportunity for students to establish friendships with peers, as well as community members. Students are able to make a meaningful link between daily activities, work skills, and the curriculum through problem-solving and action. Students learn to take pride in themselves and their social contributions while engaging in activities that establish positive connections among the school, students, and community.

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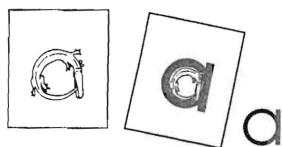
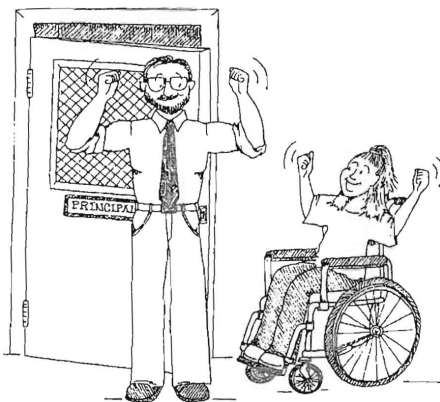
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