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Joanne Urgese

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Mainstreamed Students Doing Community Service

The Positive Effects

National Information Center
for Service Learning
1954 Buford Ave, Room R290
St. Paul, MN 55108-6197
1-800-808-SERVE

Shoreham-Wading River Middle School
Randall Road
Shoreham, New York 11786
(516) 929-8500

Joanne Urgese
May 1987

NSLC
c/o ETR Associates
4 Carbonero Way
Scotts Valley, CA 95066

Since the enactment of public law 94-142 in 1975, public schools have been searching for ways to extend the opportunities for their handicapped students to receive more of their education with nonhandicapped peers. While looking for ways to do this they have also been concerned with the outcomes such placement would have on the students in such areas as social adjustment and academic achievement. The Shoreham-Wading River Middle School has had a program in place since 1973 which responds to this need. This program, called community service, is most effective in promoting positive mainstreaming in both the area of social adjustment and of academic achievement, for both the handicapped student and the nonhandicapped student.

The community service program involves both mainstreamed and regular students going to work at neighboring day care centers, nursery schools, Head Starts, district kindergarten and elementary school classes, story hours at the public library, sites for the mentally and physically handicapped such as St. Charles Hospital, Maryhaven School and BOCES special education schools, and adult and nursing homes. The program usually entails an eight to ten week unit of study by a class, including one forty-five-minute to one-hour visit each week to work at the site. Orientation sessions using speakers, films and discussions, reading, journals and other writing, planning for work at the sites, and evaluations are incorporated in the projects. In addition, students often host the groups at their school. For all of the on-site sessions the students are responsible for planning and carrying out all the activities.

When involved in community service, the handicapped middle school students experience success and along with it receive positive reinforcement, which together strongly enhance their self esteem. The similarities between the handicapped students and the rest of the student population are emphasized while the differences are minimized.

The nonhandicapped students are made aware of, and learn to accept, people who are not like themselves. Prior to doing community service, many of these students have only seen the obvious differences between themselves, the elderly, the physically and mentally handicapped, the young and minority groups. The community service experience enables them to see the similarities between themselves and these other persons.

Long term research could undoubtedly turn up positive statistical data concerning the benefits of community service in positive mainstreaming, but this paper's premise is based on observation. Through observation, positive changes in feelings and attitudes have been detected over and over again. The events described in this paper are only a small sampling of the observed positive effects community service has on mainstreaming among students in the Shoreham-Wading River Middle School.

Case A was a mainstreamed student when, in the spring of 1986, he went to Trinity Nursery School as part of an early childhood exploration. He was diagnosed as having an attention deficit problem. In the regular classroom he had difficulty sitting for long periods of time. He often interrupted the class, particularly annoying those students seated around him. His school work suffered as a result of his inability to concentrate. At Trinity he had to work with three four-year-olds. He was surprised to see how active four-year-olds are. They didn't seem to be able to concentrate on any one thing for very long. The first day he was not well prepared and, instead of having four activities to do with the children, he had only two. He soon found himself finished with the book and craft he had brought and was out of things to do. The second week he had four activities ready. He hadn't, however, listened carefully during the preparation class a few days earlier. He read two books in a row and the four-year-olds began to wander off. He quickly learned he needed to vary activities.

At other times the students got too much glue on their craft projects and they didn't always listen to his instructions. This irritated him. Slowly Case A began to adjust his expectations and, by the end of the eight week project, he was experiencing great success. The four-year-olds began to look up to him and greet him with a great deal of enthusiasm. This did wonders for his ego. He had done a good job and for a change, praise came both from his own teachers and the teachers at the nursery school. His behavior was excellent and he was able to discuss each week's experience with his peers on an equal footing.

Case B is an example of a regular student who was in seventh grade, in the winter of 1987, when she went to the North Shore Learning Center, a school for the mentally handicapped. She was an excellent student whose peer group consisted of students of similar abilities and interests. The students in her class were asked to keep a journal reflecting their thoughts before, during, and after their community service experience. Her first entry reflected her initial fears. "I think when I first go to community service I will feel uncomfortable because I'm not used to being around handicapped people since I haven't had any experiences like this (except for going to the adult home last year.) It will probably take awhile for me to adjust."

The first few visits were a little difficult. She felt shy and unsure of what to say and how to initiate the activities she brought. When the handicapped student with whom she was working said she didn't want to do something Case B had planned, she felt a bit frustrated. As the weeks went by, she began to understand her student and to anticipate her likes and dislikes. There was no longer strained silence, but instead, laughter and smiles were the norm. The last entry in her journal shows how far Case B came. "I do feel different about handicap people now. I feel better about them in a positive way. Before community service I guess I was afraid to go near or touch them. But those feelings have gone away and better ones have taken their spot knowing about handicap people as I do now!"

Case C was a mainstreamed student in sixth grade in the fall of 1986. He was learning disabled and socially immature. He went to Woodhaven Adult Home for eight weeks. Prior to those trips, more often than not, he found himself sitting in the principal's office, cooling off after an incident in school either with another student or an adult. On the mini-bus heading for the nursing home he spoke about the impending visit with the other students. He soon discovered that even the best students were as concerned as he was about whether they would be able to handle the situation they were about to encounter. The first visit went quite well for him. He didn't like the way the building smelled and it was too hot, but the woman he met seemed really to enjoy being with him. She looked at every picture in his photo album and every now and then talked about when she was young. On the bus ride home he discovered that he had met with more success than some of the regular students. He was able to share his experience and felt good about himself in that rather new role!

The class went to Woodhaven once a week for six weeks. Each week the resident was waiting for him. He helped her make a placemat, they talked about the past and they made a pretty holiday ornament out of noodles. He had to say goodbye finally. The resident shuffled towards the door, turned and waved at him. Case C had a big smile enveloping his face. On the bus ride back to school, he got into a discussion about rock stars with a few students. He had seldom had any verbal interaction with any of those students prior to community service.

Case D was a regular student who was in seventh grade in 1984. He was an outgoing student who got along well with peers and adults alike. He went to Maryhaven, a school for the mentally handicapped, for eight weeks and worked with a student who showed strong autistic tendencies. This Maryhaven student did not communicate and when someone spoke to him there was no eye contact. After three weeks Case D approached his community service teacher saying that he did not want to go to Maryhaven anymore. He didn't know what to do with the student and felt frustrated. Both the community service teacher and the Maryhaven teacher spoke to him. It was pointed out that this, in fact, was a very difficult situation and that with his outgoing, pleasant personality, he was doing a lot of good for the Maryhaven student, even though he might not be able to discern any improvement. He was told that, although he was not apt to see large outward changes, subtle changes were already taking place.

Case D did return to Maryhaven the following week and continued to work with the student. Slowly, as the weeks passed, the student began to follow Case D around. He did the projects Case D brought with him. The last visit occurred at the Shoreham-Wading River Middle School, when the Maryhaven students came to visit. Towards the end of the visit, Case D was sitting next to his student. The teacher asked the Maryhaven student where Case D was. The student reached over, grabbed Case D's hand, looked him straight in the eye, and said his name. Case D was stunned. The work had been hard. He had continued to try and he had succeeded. He felt fantastic. That summer he did volunteer work at Maryhaven.

Case E was a mainstreamed sixth grader in 1985. She was a very quiet student. She spent a great deal of time by herself, and her art work, done in a previous grade, showed signs of a poor self-image. She never smiled. Case E went with her class to work at North Shore Lodge, an adult home. A very outgoing resident there became her friend. The resident looked for her every week and gave her hugs and a lot of compliments. On one visit the resident asked Case E why she never smiled. Case E said, "Why should I?" The resident responded, "because you look so pretty when you smile!" Case E broke into a big grin and it was true. Life came into her face and she looked like a different girl. Each week the resident reinforced that initial request and Case E began to smile more and more. Two years later, passing Case E in the hall, one would never know it was the same student. She is still smiling and teachers seldom notice her alone.

In community service handicapped students can succeed. Not only can they succeed, but they often find themselves excelling. Perhaps for the first time, they find others complimenting them for their abilities. Peer interaction often improves because of the common interest which the experience provides. Nonhandicapped students, who often experience success, may initially feel inadequate when dealing with persons they perceive as different from themselves. They may experience frustration when the persons with whom they are working don't immediately respond. They soon find themselves, out of necessity, thinking about the wishes of the others, gearing their projects to fit their specific needs.

A classroom setting places someone other than the student in charge; namely, the teacher. In community service, the student is the teacher. He or she is responsible, not just for doing the work, but also for planning it. The success or failure of the undertaking depends solely on his or her presentation and the ability to find appropriate ways to carry it out. This requires good planning and follow-through, and teachers can attest to the fact that this is not an easy task! Most handicapped students find themselves both capable of doing this and, in fact, often exceptionally good at it. Regular students often admire their expertise.

Some immediate positive results have been observed by adults working with students involved in community service projects. Community service staff members and teachers, both at Shoreham-Wading River and at the sites visited have remarked:

"Some of the school's worst behavior problems are the best students at a community service site".

a community service staff member

"I actually prefer having students from your special education classes. They do the best job."

a Trinity Nursery School teacher

"This is the best program! Our students love having your students."

a teacher at Maryhaven

"I never go to the mall because people stare at me but with your student today I really enjoyed it. I didn't feel unusual. Your student treated me like I was just the same as anyone else so I felt that way. I had a wonderful day."

a resident at Sunrest Adult Home
(She has a protruding lower lip)

Joan Lipsitz saw the value of community service, and discussed the impact on Shoreham-Wading River Middle School students, in her book, Successful Schools for Young Adolescents.

"They learn to care for others, outgrow pity and appreciate the insights of the infirm or the handicapped, tap the experiences of people different from themselves, and perform essential duties for which they are held accountable. People truly depend on them. The students perform real work and, as their journals indicate, conclude that they are valuable."

Director of the NCRY Early Adolescent project, Joan Schine, in 1981 described a Shoreham-Wading River Community Service program involving students working at a nursing home. "One student's complete journal is included. A sample from her last entry demonstrates her growth:

"If you can overlook someone's faults, whether it be physical or mental, you find out what that person stands for and who they really are...the outside is the most unimportant aspect of a person."

This was quite a change for someone who began a year and a half earlier by saying, "How do you approach somebody you don't know and who doesn't know you? It's scary."

Another reason community service is so successful with mainstreaming lies in the fact that, no matter what the handicapping condition, all students can participate in the program. A cerebral palsy Middle School student, in a wheelchair, unable to speak, communicating instead with a voice box, worked in both a Head Start with young children and in an adult home, with the elderly. He experienced success in both places. A severely mentally handicapped student went to the Sunrest Health Related Facility and brightened all the residents' day by walking through the halls saying, "hello, how ya doing," to everyone he saw.

The community service staff has watched students with behavioral problems go out into the community time after time, exhibiting

exemplary behavior. One student, prior to leaving for a trip to Step By Step, a Montessori nursery school, lay on the floor staring at the ceiling, speaking to his father who had died suddenly the year before. Twenty minutes later he was reading to five four-year-olds. One child was sitting on his lap, the others were gathered around in rapt attention. People were paying attention to him, but this time it was for a positive reason.

Community service does not totally rid a school of mainstreaming difficulties, but it does go a long way in making it a positive experience. Who knows how attitudes have been changed over the long term in the students who have participated in the program?

That attitudes definitely have changed was recently observed on a mini-bus returning from the Maryhaven School for the mentally handicapped. A popular phrase used by some students to chide a fellow student for actions which they find undesirable, is "you retard." A student called someone a "retard" and fourteen other students immediately reprimanded the student, telling him not to say that again! The speaker turned bright red and protested that he hadn't meant anything by it. Will any of those students use that phrase again? I doubt it. The students at Maryhaven were their friends. They had learned that "retarded" and "undesirable" are not synonymous.

RESOURCES

BOCES School, St. Charles Hospital, Port Jefferson, New York

Cedar Lodge Adult Home, Center Moriches, New York

Central Brookhaven Head Start, Coram, New York

Just Kids Learning Center, Middle Island, New York

Lipsitz, Joan. "Schools that Succeed in Teaching
Early Adolescents." The Education Digest:
April 1982: P. 29-30

Maryhaven Adult Home, Port Jefferson, New York

North Country Learning Center, Stony Brook, New York

Perkins Adult Home, Riverhead, New York

Schine, Joan. "The Early Adolescent." Resources
For Youth: Vol. X, III: P. 3-5

Shoreham-Wading River School District, Shoreham, New York

Step By Step Learning Center, Miller Place, New York

Sunrest Nursing Home, Port Jefferson, New York

Trinity Nursery School, Rocky Point, New York

Woodhaven Adult Home, Port Jefferson Station, New York

The author has worked in community service at the Shoreham-Wading River Middle School for the past five years, as both a teacher and teacher assistant. The observations in this paper are based on her own observations at all the sites listed.

**Check List for Organizing
Community Service Projects**

1. Meet with our teachers.
2. Arrange tentative times and dates; including field-site visits and preparation times here.
3. Contact field site(s).
4. Arrange minibuses and who will staff the project.
5. Permission letters.
6. Set up orientation and materials:
 - o at field site
 - o speaker/workshop here
 - o films/filmstrips
 - o curriculum materials
 - o arts and crafts ideas/supplies
 - o establish library, if desire
 - o hand-outs for first-day observations, how to work with young children or the aged, etc.
7. Contact art/music/farm/horticulture if field-site group(s) will be visiting this school.

Shoreham-Wading River Middle School
Randall Road
Shoreham, New York 11786-9745
Att: Joanne Urgese, Community Service Coordinator
(516) 929-8500

The Albert G. Prodeli Shoreham-Wading River Middle School
Randall Road, Shoreham, New York
11786-9745
(516) 821-8211

Dr. Cary E. Bell
Principal

Dr. Bonne Sue Adams
Assistant Principal

Winifred Evers Pardo
Administrative Assistant

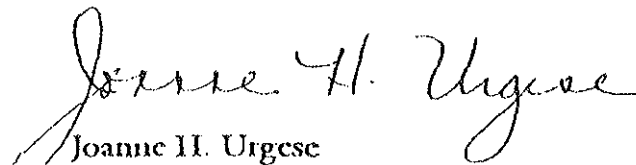
March 9, 1994

Dear Mr. Robin Vne-Benson:

Thank you for your inquiry about our school and its programs. We are enclosing materials which we hope will be of use to you.

It may be that you have specific questions in mind which are not addressed in the rather general pieces of information which we are enclosing. If this is the case, please feel free to call us and we shall try to supply answers or refer you to someone who can be of greater assistance.

Sincerely,


Joanne H. Urgese
Community Service Coordinator

JHU:dmg
Enc.

CSI