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## **The effects of participation in service-learning on adolescents with disabilities**

CATHY L. BRILL

This article examines the effects of active participation in service-learning on adolescents with disabilities. Through a survey of special education teachers, effects on students' socialization, behavior, attitudes, attendance, academic skills, functional skills, and relationships with non-disabled peers are explored. Promising results are found for adolescents with mild disabilities in attendance and academic skills, and for adolescents with moderate to profound disabilities in socialization and relationships with non-disabled peers. Implications for school inclusion of students with disabilities are addressed and recommendations for areas of future study are made.

### INTRODUCTION

Students with disabilities are constantly on the receiving end of special education and related services. They are perceived as persons in need of assistance by the public. Seldom do they see themselves as competent and capable of giving assistance and making positive changes in the community.

However, young people with disabilities have much to offer their schools and communities, if they are asked to help and given support to enable them to participate. Service-learning provides an avenue through which students can claim their role as citizens, improve their self-images and interact in their communities with dignity.

This article examines the effects of active participation in service-learning on adolescents with cognitive, physical, and emotional disabilities. Through an informal survey of 13 special education teachers in the state of Maryland who engage their students in service-learning (a total of 90 teachers were involved in the program at the time of the study), we gain a picture of how these adolescents benefit from such involvement.

For this study, service-learning is defined as "making a difference through the actions of caring for others through personal contact, indirect service, or civic action, either in the school or in the community, with

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structured preparation and reflection" (Maryland Student Service Alliance, 1989). It is distinguished from volunteerism and from community service by its structured learning component, which links the service performed and the school curriculum.

The preparation phase involves students meeting as a group and with a teacher and community members to explore service opportunities and learn appropriate skills. Reflection involves thinking, discussing, reading, writing, drawing—that is, familiar activities that focus on helping students learn from their experience.

### THE PROBLEM

Isolation from non-disabled peers and from the community at large is a longstanding problem for young people with disabilities. Kept in a protected atmosphere, they may miss experiences other students take for granted. Lack of familiarity, in turn, yields negative stereotypes of youth with disabilities among other students. (Gillies and Shackley, 1988; Ravaud, 1987). Students with disabilities may not be accustomed to using public transportation, or venturing into new environments and taking on new roles. One teacher in the survey discovered that her students did not know how to use umbrellas when she took them out to the service site on a rainy day.

Programs for students with disabilities are becoming more "community-based", bringing students out beyond the walls of their classrooms to gain experience of the real world. Most of these efforts, however, do not give students the role of valued contributor to society, and regular school service programs typically do not involve students who are "different". In a study of 5400 schools, Newman and Rutter (1986) found that at-risk students and those with behavioral problems had no involvement in service programs. Like at-risk students, many students with disabilities experience service only as recipients of others' efforts.

#### *Why service-learning?*

Research on the benefits of service-learning for students with disabilities could not be found in the extant literature. Research on the benefits for non-disabled students, while sparse, indicates positive outcomes. Conrad and Hedin (1982) found that students in service programs developed more favorable attitudes toward adults in general, as well as towards the organizations and people with whom they were involved. Luchs (1981) found that high school students involved in community service gained a more positive attitude toward others, a greater sense of efficacy, and higher

self-esteem than non-participating students. Calabrese and Schumer (1986) cited lower levels of isolation and fewer disciplinary problems among adolescents involved in a service program. Hamilton and Fenzel (1988) noted that adolescents gained social responsibility through service involvement. The question for this study, then, was the extent to which any of these benefits would also be experienced by students with disabilities.

### THE STUDENTS AND THEIR SERVICE PROJECTS

In July of 1991, the Maryland Student Service Alliance began a project to engage students with disabilities in service-learning. The purpose of the project was to involve students with disabilities in service activities of the same quality as those of their non-disabled peers. Originally working with public schools in three local districts, the Alliance wrote a curriculum, trained teachers, and provided technical assistance to schools. The Alliance now works with 16 local districts, and will increase that number to 20 by June 1994.

Currently, over 2000 students with disabilities ranging from mild to profound, including mental retardation, learning disabilities, and emotional disturbance are involved in ongoing service-learning projects through this Maryland program. Approximately one quarter of the students have physical disabilities in addition to cognitive disabilities. The students range in age from seven to 21, and represent 16 of Maryland's 24 school districts.

The students represent a wide range of functional abilities. Some perform service integrated with non-disabled peers; others do not. They perform primarily group projects, working with their classmates to carry out activities. The students are involved for the most part in direct service (face-to-face with those they help), with some performing indirect service or advocacy. For example, a group of students with moderate to severe mental retardation helps manage a clothing program for needy families. The service activities are typically infused into their curriculum, and written into their Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs), teaching or reinforcing functional or academic skills.

The students travel to the clothing site (a church) once a week to sort and hang clothing, taking back to the school any items in need of cleaning or repair. Another group of students, with different IEP goals, cleans and mends the clothes as part of the home economics curriculum. The classroom experience includes discussion of the needs of low-income people. For some of the students with more profound disabilities, the skills

learned are basic, such as sorting types of garments or making judgments about whether or not an item is beyond repair.

Peer tutoring is another example of service students perform. Adolescents with mild disabilities (including learning disabilities, mental retardation, or emotional disturbance) tutor younger students with disabilities in reading and Math. Three times a week, the paired students meet for 45 min of tutoring. The 8th grade peer tutors meet periodically to prepare and reflect: they learn new techniques, discuss frustrations and successes, and plan for the next session. After 6 months, the teacher added to the group regular education 8th graders who wanted to tutor. The original students oriented and trained the new students.

### STUDY DESIGN

The Maryland Student Service Alliance conducted an informal survey of teachers to explore the effects of participation in service activities on adolescents with disabilities. Teachers who have been engaging their students in service-learning for between 6 and 21 months were surveyed.

Special educators are typically skilled observers. Many IEP goals are assessed solely through teacher observation. Many special education teachers have experience with behavior modification techniques, which require careful observation and recording of behavior. For many of the students, particularly those with more severe disabilities, traditional standardized assessments are inappropriate. Thus, teachers are fairly sophisticated in their ability to assess learning through observation.

For the purposes of this paper, survey results from teachers of students aged 12 to 21 are reported. The special education teachers were all trained in teaching service-learning by the Maryland Student Service Alliance through its intensive summer seminar and were provided ongoing technical assistance.

The teachers, all certified in special education, work in middle schools, high schools, and special education centers. They attended the training either because of personal or professional interest or because their school system requested it.

#### *Method*

Thirteen teachers participated in a survey conducted by project staff regarding the impact of involvement in service-learning.

The survey consisted of a series of questions covering the scope, level, location, and frequency of the service-learning activities. Questions about outcomes were asked for the following areas: behavior, classroom

work/academics, attitudes, functional skills, socialization, attendance, and relationships with non-disabled peers. The format used was, "What changes, if any, have you seen in students' behavior (or socialization, etc) due to their involvement in service-learning?" In addition, teachers were asked for their own thoughts and feelings about the service-learning project, as well as student and parent feedback.

Teachers were chosen to be representative of the variety of programs involved, which included rural, urban, and suburban districts; different school settings (self-contained classrooms, special schools, inclusion settings); and integrated as well as exclusively special education projects. Teachers were evenly distributed among different types of districts, but due to larger class size in urban settings, 175 out of the 315 students were urban. Two-thirds of the students were involved in integrated projects with students without disabilities. The students were evenly divided by degree of disability, 167 having mild to moderate disabilities and 158 having severe to profound disabilities. To the best of each teacher's knowledge, their students had not been involved as providers of service prior to this project.

### RESULTS

#### *Socialization*

Five teachers of students with mild disabilities and seven teachers of students with moderate to profound disabilities indicated there were changes in socialization in their students; only one of the 13 teachers saw no change.

#### *Mild*

One group of students adhered to the project's restrictions on swearing, although foul language had previously been a problem in that classroom. In addition, the students helped "police" each other, monitoring their fellow tutors' behavior and correcting it. Another teacher saw improvements in her students' interaction with each other. The group problem-solving techniques she taught during the reflection segment of the service-learning projects seem to have transferred to other classroom situations, since the students became more likely to apply the problem-solving techniques to interpersonal conflicts in the class. Another teacher found that her students' communication with staff and adult volunteers on site became more frequent and spontaneous.

A teacher who involved her students in environmental service saw them become more aware of the global community and develop a social con-

sciousness expressed through stating concerns about the environment. Another teacher watched as her students worked well with non-disabled students towards a common goal (helping those in poverty). The students with disabilities worked well as a group, applying problem-solving skills (such as analysing choices and evaluating outcomes) and developing friendships and relationships with others. Improved social behaviors appeared later in non-service activities in several classrooms.

#### *Moderate to profound*

One group of students learned how to write thank-you notes and realized the importance of writing them after they received such notes themselves for the first time, because of their service to the school. Their teacher commented that the students discussed how important it is to thank people who help them. These students also met more people in the school through their service involvement; their social circle widened. Another teacher believed gains in socialization to be the area of greatest improvement for her students. They became less likely to be in cliques, and started introducing themselves to others and behaving more assertively when they meet strangers. Previously, her students would hang back and let others control interactions.

One group of students improved turn-taking and group skills by practising these during their service project. Another group of students demonstrated an increased level of polite speaking in social settings; their teacher attributed this to the practice in polite speaking they gained in the service setting.

#### *Behavior*

Four teachers of students with mild disabilities and seven teachers of students with severe disabilities reported behavioral changes in their students.

#### *Mild*

In one class, the number of fights and suspensions decreased. All four classes demonstrated increased frequency of appropriate behavior at the service site. Two of the teachers saw this appropriate behavior carrying over into other classroom activities, citing increased role-modeling, better problem-solving, more participation in class activities, and greater eagerness to participate. Two teachers noted that students began to "think things through" more.

#### *Moderate to profound*

In one class, the students improved their behavior at the service site; students who had to be "timed-out" for disruptive or aggressive behavior

during the first few visits eventually behaved appropriately. One teacher noted that her students learned to think things through before acting, and have more positive behavior in general. One class showed uniformly good behavior on the service outings—even those members who typically exhibit disruptive behavior. Their teacher did not see any carry-over of this improvement during other activities.

#### *Academics*

Five teachers of mildly involved students and two teachers of severely involved students noted academic changes in their students.

#### *Mild*

Five teachers observed that students were more apt to complete assignments; this was especially true for the three teachers who made participation in service contingent on assignment completion. Students were noted to be eager to complete their work so they could go with the class to the service site. Thus service seemed to be a strong motivator for some students.

The teachers also noted that students "showed up more" for class. One group of students received fewer Ds and Es on their report cards than previously. Two teachers whose students were involved in literacy and tutoring projects found that some of their students began reading better, were more willing to read aloud in class, and more willing to write. None of the students who were involved in the service project in one class were held back a grade at the end of the school year. This is highly unusual in that school.

#### *Moderate to profound*

Students in one class showed an increased ability to generate ideas following service involvement. Another teacher believed the practice in all four curricular areas—domestic, community, vocational, and recreation/leisure—to be valuable in reinforcing and strengthening her students' skills, but observed no dramatic changes.

#### *Functional Skills*

One teacher of mildly involved students and eight teachers of severely involved students noted improvements in functional skills.

#### *Mild*

The students gained skills in organizing, planning, and carrying out new things; their teacher saw these skills transfer from the service project into other classroom projects and tasks.

*Moderate to profound*

In seven of the eight classes of students with moderate to profound disabilities, students' comfort level with going into new environments and trying new things increased. Teachers noted fewer anxious questions, more happy facial expressions, and more positive verbalizations about new activities.

One group of students' time on task improved—this was for the activity of collecting and sorting recyclable materials. By structuring the service experience so it incorporated practice at the skills of collating, stapling, sorting, and heeding safety precautions, another teacher helped students increase their skills in these areas. Through involvement in service to nursing home residents, a group of students began to handle their own personal hygiene needs better, and to handle carrying trays and maneuvering wheelchairs and walkers better in the school cafeteria. Their teacher attributed the latter gains to the students' practice in maneuvering and handling items with care around the fragile senior citizens in the nursing home. The personal hygiene gains, she believed, came from the students' distaste for the smells and messes of the nursing home; several of her students commented that even though they were also in wheelchairs, they didn't need to look or smell unpleasant.

Students who taught ceramics to senior citizens gained new ceramic skills to pass on to their senior partners. Another teacher found that the service-learning activity reinforced domestic skills. Her students made gifts and food for senior citizens.

*Attitudes*

All 13 teachers reported changes in their students' attitudes.

*Mild*

All students demonstrated more maturity and responsibility, through behaviors such as decreased showing off and increased frequency of acting as role models (and verbalizing about their need to set good examples). Students also commented that they were looking forward to the service project sessions. Several students made comments that they felt they could accomplish more in school, after their service experience. Two teachers noted that their students' attitudes were more positive in general. One previously unmotivated student later commented that he plans to volunteer for a soup kitchen in the future, "when he retires". Several teachers noted that their students became more sensitive to the needs of others.

*Moderate to profound*

All eight teachers noted that their students enjoyed the activities and felt

good about them. This was demonstrated through positive verbalizations and facial expressions, frequent questioning about when the next service project day will occur, general excitement when discussing the projects. Students in two classes involved with senior citizens developed more positive attitudes about the elderly; they now make more positive comments about them. In general, most of the teachers thought their students became more sensitive to the needs of others.

All the teachers of moderately to profoundly involved students said that initially their students didn't know what service was, didn't know much about the sites where they performed service, and had not had much experience helping others outside of their own classroom. Their students became open to the idea of service and anxious to attempt another project, often asking when they could help someone else. They also demonstrated a higher frequency of helping behavior within the classroom. One teacher who involved his students in service to protect the environment stated that his students asked when they can work on another similar problem, and that they have a higher awareness of the environment in general.

*Attendance*

Four teachers of mildly involved students reported improvements in attendance; no teachers of severely involved students saw changes.

*Mild*

Several chronic absentees improved their attendance in four classes, telling their teachers they did not want to miss the service projects. One student with poor attendance and a troubled family life made sure he was in school for service days; he asked his teacher for dates well in advance, and requested that she remind him several times.

*Moderate to profound*

In general poor attendance was not a problem for these students. A few students have attendance problems which are due to the severity of their disabilities. No change could be expected.

*Relationships with non-disabled peers*

Two teachers of mildly involved students and five teachers of severely involved students noted changes in this area.

*Mild*

Students in one class learned to interact appropriately with non-disabled peers; the students shared their experiences with each other. Doing service together gave them something to talk about. Due to the structured

opportunity to work with students without disabilities, another group of students mixed better with non-disabled peers and became less nervous about being with them.

#### *Moderate to profound*

Of the teachers who involved their students in service with non-disabled peers, all five saw changes. One group of students learned to recognize and speak with their project partners in the hall. Before the service project, the students had not had a great deal of interaction with non-disabled peers; their social circle widened. Another group of students became less shy with non-disabled peers. Previously, the students with disabilities waited until they were spoken to first; they will now ask questions of their non-disabled peers to initiate a conversation.

Another teacher found that others in the school now perceive her students as valuable members of the community and regard them in a more able light; teachers and students have made favorable comments to her about her students, and other teachers are more willing to accept the students in their classrooms.

Through the service project, the students had the opportunity to be part of a different peer group, becoming friends with students they never would have gotten to know without the project. One teacher did note that her integrated project pointed out the need for more direct contact with the group of non-disabled students with which her students worked. Her students were a little intimidated, and worried that the other students would stare at them. She believed that if the students had started their project together in the planning stages, rather than her students joining an already established project, this discomfort would have been lessened. Joint service projects provided the first opportunity for inclusion of students into the mainstream in one middle school; this positive experience led to the development of a full scale inclusion program in the school the following year.

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### *Knowledge gained*

This survey reveals positive gains in several areas from engaging students with disabilities in service-learning, based on teacher observation. Service-learning has the potential to have a positive impact on the development and functioning of students with disabilities.

The gains in socialization, attitudes and behavior for all the students are

compelling and deserve further study. Attendance and academic skills were positively affected for mildly involved students; attitudes and relationships with non-disabled peers were enhanced for the students with moderate to profound disabilities; these also warrant further study.

#### *Potential for Mainstreaming/Inclusion*

Teachers who engaged their students in projects integrated with non-disabled peers reported small gains in relationships with those peers. Areas to explore in the future are the effects of inclusive service-learning as an alternative to "special friends" groups gatherings of regular and special education students, often viewed as service on the part of regular education students, for the purpose of providing peer relationships for the special education students. Service-learning projects may be a more natural and proactive way to create peer relationships than special friends groups; they also serve to put both groups of students on more equal footing, as working together for a common goal may create more genuine relationships. The Alliance is working with several schools interested in using service-learning to drive inclusion of students with severe disabilities and will look further at this issue.

#### *Future directions*

Future study is indicated to look at variables such as structure of the project, service issue area, length of time involved in project, level of service (direct, indirect, or advocacy), and optimal amount of preparation and reflection. One teacher who saw very few changes engaged her students in indirect service, infrequently (once a month). A comparative study of kinds of service and frequency of service may reveal best practices.

Examination of these variables may lead to conclusions about the most effective structure for service-learning projects in order to lead to desired outcomes. For example, how can a teacher structure a project for students with mild disabilities to lead to the greatest increase in their socialization and academic skills, or for students with severe disabilities to lead to improvement in behavior and relationships with non-disabled peers?

Interesting material for future study are changes in community members' and non-disabled peers' perceptions of students with disabilities due to service involvement. Researchers have documented negative perceptions by non-disabled peers (Ravaud, 1987; Gillies and Shackley, 1988; Fiedler and Simpson, 1987). Anecdotally, several teachers commented that their students gained a higher profile in the school due to their service activities. Service-learning may prove to have the potential to raise the status of this group of students.

Also worthy of further exploration are methods to increase the infusion

of service into the curriculum for students in special education, fostering more community-based education. The teachers surveyed were pioneers in their schools, using service-learning to meet students' IEP goals. Making service-learning part of the functional or academic curriculum may enhance the opportunities for involvement for a greater number of students.

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## Gender differences in adolescents' attitudes toward mandatory community service

FAYNEESE MILLER

One purpose of this study was to examine high school students' attitudes toward a mandatory community service requirement. A second purpose was to identify the reasons that underlie the students' attitudes toward mandatory service and service in general. Ninety-one male and female 11th and 12th grade students, enrolled in either a public or private school, read a script about a community service requirement being proposed by the legislatures in two New England (or Southern) states and then responded to a series of attitude, trait rating, and cognitive thought-listing or reasoning questions. Females were more positive toward the proposal and generally rated supporters and opposers of a mandatory service proposal more favorably than did the males. There was also a grade effect difference. Upper grade students, in general, gave more reasons for or against the proposal than lower grade students. Implications of the findings of this study for service learning programs that are school based are discussed.

#### INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, researchers' interest in understanding adolescents' attitudes toward mandatory community service has increased. This interest has been partially sparked by recent reports about the self-interested value system of adolescents (Astin, 1985; Miller, In Press) and the increased attention to such social problems as violence and substance abuse among adolescents, on the one hand, and alienation and apathy on the other.

In order to address the issue of self-interested values and social problems of adolescents, some educators and politicians have proposed that schools either institute a mandatory community service requirement or strongly encourage such a requirement for its students. The purpose of school-based community service would be to encourage the development of personal (e.g. self-esteem, moral/values), intellectual (e.g. critical

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