

1995

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Recommended Citation

Chamberlain, Mary, "Inclusion and Community Service Learning: A Partnership" (1995). *Service Learning, General*. 97.

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Acknowledgments

The family visits described in this chapter were done in collaboration with Judith Solsken, of the Reading and Writing Program, and Jerri Willett, of the Cultural Diversity and Curriculum Reform Program, of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Research on this project was funded during 1991-92 by a grant from the National Council of Teachers of English.

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Inclusion and Community Service Learning: A Partnership

Mary Chamberlain, Teacher, Rebecca Johnson School,
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Teachers and students, already burdened by seemingly overwhelming curriculum demands, are seeing more areas of study moved into the schools as a result of today's societal needs. Community service learning must not be perceived as yet another burden, but as an integrated part of the curriculum, an enhancement to teaching and learning.

I began to weave community service learning into the 6th grade English curriculum in 1991-93, following the recommendations of middle school task forces (Atwell 1987). During this time, inclusion—the integration of special education and bilingual students with regular students—became part of the Springfield Public Schools education program. The following is the story of the development of a community service learning/inclusion partnership, the integration of community service learning into the curriculum, and real writing for real purposes.

Rebecca Johnson School, a K-8 magnet school of about 900 students, is an inner-city school with a diverse population of students, some of whom are bused to school.

Kennedy Middle School, the partnership school, has a population of approximately 650 students. In this urban setting, many students are bused from all sections of the city, and some students who live in the neighborhood walk. There is an ethnically diverse group of Afro-American, Hispanic, and white students. This public middle school is situated in a community that has a range of middle to low economic levels.

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Developing a Partnership

Beginning in 1991, my 6th grade Language Arts classes created a partnership with two Developmental Skills classes at Kennedy Middle School. Children in these classes have severe mental and physical disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, hearing and sight loss, seizure disorders, and limited or no verbal skills. During the first year, 6th graders visited the Developmental Skills classes twice a week on a rotating basis. With the help of an Inclusion Grant, the second year's partnership shifted from reverse mainstreaming to an inclusive model, bringing the Developmental Skills students into the 6th graders' classroom. While ten or twelve 6th graders worked with five to six special education students, the rest of the class worked in cooperative poetry groups. Each week the 6th grade partners rotated to work with the special education students.

Sixth graders kept a Community Service Learning Log in which they reflected on their experience. In the second year, 6th graders also partnered with 8th graders as they wrote, directed, and produced two Dr. Seuss plays. The troupe performed their plays at the local Shriners' Hospital for Crippled Children as a vehicle for expanding their work with children with disabilities to the larger community.

Was the second year's partnership to be called inclusion or community service learning? Community service learning is exactly what its name implies. It is a service performed to help the community. It isn't new. Consciously adding a learning component to community service is new. An important part of the learning component is reflection, when teachers allow time for students to think back on their service through discussions, writing, drawing, and other media. Then, teachers hope, students integrate the learning into their lives to help them become active and responsible citizens.

Inclusion is more a state of mind or a philosophy than a methodology. It's the belief that all children can learn in some capacity, and that all children, despite disabilities or ethnicity, can be integrated into one environment and learn from each other (Kate Fenton, Inclusion Specialist, Springfield, Mass., personal communication, 1994)

As students began the second year of the partnership and reflected on their experiences, I would often say to them that I was confused. I didn't know if the partnership was community service learning or inclusion. It was a pilot program in which special education students were being included in a regular education classroom. Yet regular education students were providing a service to their school community

through the partnership. By combining the two processes, each reinforced the other. Inclusion activities provided the vehicle for student interaction, and the community-service-learning process called for students' conscious reflection on their experiences working together.

The Partnership and the Curriculum

Did this partnership interfere with the English curriculum? Not at all. Based on the theory of writing process, the curriculum requires students to learn the techniques and strategies of a writing workshop. Writing can be integrated through literature or writing units.

When my students began the partnership with the Developmental Skills classes, the experience gave them a basis for real writing for real purposes. They had a ready-made topic: their feelings and learning experiences resulting from their work with the students in the Developmental Skills classes.

Free writing was a common reflective activity. After a class discussion, they would free-write for 10-15 minutes, using these questions as guides: What did you do? How did you feel? and What did you learn? As a culminating activity, they prepared a report for the Exceptional People's Awareness Day organized by Kennedy Middle School's Special Education Department. In preparing this report, they followed the "writing workshop" steps, as follows:

After a class discussion (prewriting), the students decided they wanted to present their report as a picture book (prewriting). They outlined and organized the sequence of the picture book and chose what page they wanted to work on (prewriting). They wrote about the beginning of the program. The middle of the book included descriptive paragraphs of each Developmental Skills student. The conclusion was a list of what they learned through reflection on community service (drafting). As the students reworked their pages, they decided to include a dedication page and a page about the authors (revision). They then edited their work, and I published their book on the computer (editing and publication).

The students were actively involved in this writing project. They knew that they were experts because their writing was based on their own community-service-learning experiences. Because they made decisions on presentation and content, they owned the writing. And because I was comfortable with the knowledge that students were experimenting

with many writing strategies, techniques, and styles and integrating them into their experiences as writers, I was able to give them plenty of time. The three basics of writing—time, ownership, and response—were an integral part of this report (see Atwell 1987).

Real Purposes

The class was an active workshop. Students constantly responded because they had a real audience—the people attending the Exceptional People's Awareness Day Exhibit.

The genre chosen by the students, the picture book, incorporating all aspects of the writing process, supported the curriculum. Real writing for real purposes supported the regular education students. And the community service learning/inclusion process supported the special education students. Because there was such a fine line between community service learning and inclusion, the two processes supported and reinforced each other. This fine line enabled us to weave curriculum into real-life experiences and enrich the learning of both regular and special education students.

Reference

Atwell, N. (1987). *In the Middle*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.

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Social Studies Moves into the Community

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Active Citizenship Today, a program of service-learning pilot projects in the Omaha Public Schools, demonstrates service learning with a corollary, the examination of public policy. Five projects, involving students in geography, history, and government classes, illustrate what students have learned through community service.

From Omaha to Washington, D.C.

One project, developed by a high school Honors Geography class, began by asking students what they wanted the United States to look like in 10 years and what needed to be done to achieve that goal. They isolated what they considered to be the country's most serious problem: the budget deficit. They then invited knowledgeable people to speak to the class on the deficit and potential solutions to the problem. Among the speakers were the mayor of the City of Omaha, the governor of Nebraska, and the congressman from Nebraska's Second District. After the class felt they had acquired as much information as possible, they developed a series of recommendations and then surveyed other social studies classes, families, and neighbors on their reactions to the recommendations. Armed with this information, the class developed proposals for how the federal government ought to deal with the budget deficit.

Two representatives of the class went to Washington, D.C., and presented the report to a member of President Clinton's staff and requested that it be forwarded to the President. They later received