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Incorporating Service Learning Into Your Special Education Classroom

VICTORIA GROVES SCOTT

In service learning, students learn skills and apply their knowledge while addressing an identified community need. Service learning is especially powerful in special education as students with disabilities are allowed the opportunity to give, instead of receive, help and support, and therefore gain independence and self-esteem. This article outlines the steps involved in implementing a service learning project within a special education classroom.

Never doubt the power of a small group of committed individuals to change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead

In recent years, widespread concern has been expressed about the decline of civility and civic engagement among youth (Kauffman & Burbach, 1997; Schroeder, 2003). This decline is demonstrated by lower numbers of registered voters, lack of respect for elders, reduced community involvement, and less tolerance for others. With rising numbers of students with behavior challenges and the perceived link between the general decline in civility and school violence, teachers are increasingly looking for intervention strategies. The question is what can teachers do to address the academic, social, and civic needs of students with disabilities?

With a tendency to focus on deficits and, therefore, an emphasis on providing assistance to students with disabilities, these students become used to receiving and

less accustomed to giving. For these and other reasons, many students with disabilities display learned helplessness, suffer from low self-esteem, and have low levels of self-efficacy. When students have less self-efficacy, they feel their actions cannot produce positive results. They tend to be apathetic about both academic and social issues. One way to empower students to realize the power of their contribution to society is through service learning. Research has suggested that service learning can improve students' academic outcomes, increase content knowledge, and improve school attendance (Muscott & O'Brien, 1999; Terry, 2003).

Service Learning Versus Community-Based Involvement

To design and implement a service learning project, teachers must understand the difference between community-based involvement and service learning. In community-based

projects, students are simply placed in the community to improve their skills. They may demonstrate skills by working at the local fast-food restaurant or restocking shelves at the grocery store. In those situations, they apply daily living and functional skills in the community environment. In service learning, on the other hand, the emphasis is on using skills to help or support a community agency. For example, students might practice their reading skills by reading to older adults at a retirement community, or students with visual impairments might use their writing skills by making Braille markers for public buildings.

When planning service learning projects, it is important to remember that everyone, regardless of the severity of his or her disability, has something to offer. Students with significant disabilities might practice mobility by walking dogs from their wheelchair at the animal shelter. Students with mild disabilities might help younger children learn to read or write. Even young children with disabilities might be able to plant flowers at the local park, instead of in the little plastic cups commonly seen in school windows. It is this sense of contribution and support of others that leads to the authentic use of skills learned in special education programs, thereby reinforcing and strengthening academic skills while enhancing self-esteem and independence.

Designing and Implementing a Service Learning Project

The following steps will help you design and implement a service learning project in your special education class.

1. **Identify curriculum goals.** Integrating curriculum and service is essential for a true service learning project. Start by asking yourself what skills your students are working on or learning that might be useful to the community. Applying skills taught in the classroom should guide the service learning project.
2. **Identify a community need.** Another essential component is identifying a community need. The project should be firmly based in an activity that provides a valuable service to the community. To identify community needs, you might call community agencies. Talk to representatives from local agencies, retirement communities, health agencies, day care centers, food banks, or Habitat for Humanity. Look through local newspapers to find community activities that might be appropriate. Have several agencies in mind in case one agency is not able to participate in the project with your class. Remember, this has to be a collaborative relationship. Partners must give and receive from each other.
3. **Determine the level of student involvement.** Service learning can take several forms: indirect ser-

vice, direct service, or advocacy. In indirect service, students organize drives, collections, or fund raisers. It is important to research the need before embarking on an indirect service activity. For example, if you are thinking of having a food drive, ask, "What type of food do we need to collect?" and set parameters for the drive accordingly. Direct service involves students assisting their community partner by tutoring, visiting, or working with others. This may take a bigger time commitment. Finally, advocacy allows students the opportunity to raise consciousness about community issues or concerns. For example, students might put on a play based on an issue, lobby for a cause, or conduct a public awareness session. Through advocacy, students are able to see how their actions can effect change.

4. **Involve administrators.** Now that you have at least tentatively decided on a project, you need to gain support from your administrator. This is especially important if you plan on taking your students off site to a community placement. The administrator has to approve your project. Even though the project might not be completely planned or organized, it is important to get an early approval of the idea to avoid unnecessary work, in case your project meets resistance from school administration.
5. **Incorporate youth voice into the project.** One of the biggest advantages to service learning is the empowerment students derive from helping others. This is especially important for students with disabilities who might otherwise never have a chance to offer assistance. Students may help select the community need that will be addressed or help organize the project. One approach to incorporating student voice into the project is to create classroom teams. By being allowed to pick the team on which they wish to participate, each student has an opportunity to share his or her special gifts. The classroom teams will lead the project in different areas. For instance, you might have a budget team, a publicity team, a team responsible for gathering materials, and a team responsible for writing a flyer or a thank-you note. Even younger students can select which flowers to plant in the park or measure the garden to decide how many vegetables are needed. Figure 1 shows a form used for planning student teams.
6. **Design the project with all participants.** Once you have approval from administrators, you can begin to collaborate with the selected community agency to design the project. Now is the time to make agreements with your partners on the who, what, and when for your project. Collaboration is the key. Thus, you should blend community needs with student voice and administrative guidelines. Make sure you keep the administration up to date on the project's design and implementation features.

Teams	Members	Leader	Planned Activities
Research	1. Tyler 2. Jaxon 3. Sarah	Jaxon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Research kinds of food needed for food pantry o Share research with class
Publicity	1. Deshon 2. Bailey 3. Mika	Deshon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Make posters to hang in school. Use information from Research Team o Write announcement to be read at morning announcement time
Materials	1. Kendal 2. Connor 3. McKenna	McKenna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Gather boxes to collect food o Decorate food donation boxes
Writing	1. Alex 2. Chien 3. Kesha	Kesha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Write letter to be sent home with students
Organization	1. Brydon 2. Marcus	Brydon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Collect food from donation boxes daily o Count and organize food donations

Figure 1. Student teams planning form for a third-grade food drive.

Remember to be realistic. It is better to design a small project and accomplish all of your goals than to design a huge project that is abandoned because of lack of resources or commitment.

7. **Involve parents.** Before going further, it is important to obtain support and consent from the parents. You should provide details to the parents, and discuss the curriculum goals the students will be demonstrating during the project.
8. **Set aside time for the project.** This might be the most difficult part of your project. All valuable learning experiences take time, and time is a precious commodity in schools. You must build time into students' schedule for the project. You will also need time to plan and coordinate the project. The project should take several weeks. A one-shot project will not produce the results of empowering students with self-efficacy. They need several months to see how their actions can influence positive change.
9. **Prepare your students.** Once you have selected a project, you need to prepare the students for the project. This includes not only academic skills but also social or emotional preparation. If the project will involve working in a hospital, ask your students, "What experiences have you had in a hospital?" Let them reflect on their experiences. You may have to prepare them for the smell or the structure of the hospital. If a student has had an unpleasant experience at a hospital, you want to know that before you send him or her into a hospital to read to children who are ill.
10. **Teach the necessary social skills.** Students with disabilities often have social skills deficits. Therefore, in preparation for working in the community, students might need lessons on greeting adults, using appropriate language in public, accepting corrective feedback, listening, offering suggestions in a nice way, and so on.
11. **Implement your project.** Now that all the planning has been accomplished, you are ready to begin work. Let the students revel in the excitement of helping others and serving a community need.
12. **Monitor student involvement.** Your students will need constant supervision throughout the service project, including physical and social support. Make sure everyone is participating and that the engagement in the community is beneficial for the students.

Answer these questions in your service learning journal.

1. Describe what activity you participated in today.
2. What difference did it make?
3. How did that make you feel?
4. What would you do differently?
5. What are you most proud of?

Figure 2. Service learning journal questions.

13. **Have a plan to deal with problems.** Learning is a process, and there are sure to be setbacks along the way. Discuss with your students situations that might cause problems and how to handle them. You might need to reteach particular social skills or role-play how to react to a problem situation.
14. **Encourage student reflection.** Reflection is a key component of service learning. We want to encourage students to internalize the feelings of being successful and have them feel pride in their accomplishments. Have students discuss their reflections or keep a written journal documenting their feelings during the project. Figure 2 is an example of journal questions they might be asked to think about.
15. **Assess students' application of academic skills using the curriculum goals.** Students should now be actively engaged with the project. Whether they are reading to preschoolers or delivering meals to the elderly, you can evaluate their application of the curriculum goals. Figure 3 is an example of a rubric used to assess student handwriting on a thank-you

	3	2	1
Shape and form of letters	Shape of the letters are uniform, and all letters are formed correctly.	Various shapes are used or some letters are not formed correctly.	Various shapes are used and some letters are not formed correctly.
Spacing between letters and words	Letter spacing is uniform. Letters are close together within words, and there is one pencil width between words.	Letter spacing is not consistently uniform throughout the writing.	Letters are touching or one pencil width apart within words and spacing between words is one pencil-width apart.
Size of upper- and lowercase letters	The size of upper- and lowercase letters is consistent. Uppercase letters touch the bottom and top line of the paper. Lowercase letters are half the space of the line.	The size of upper- and lowercase letters is not consistent.	There is no distinction between the sizes of lower- and uppercase letters.

Figure 3. Thank-you card handwriting rubric.

card written after a service learning project was completed.

16. **Evaluate the outcomes of the project.** As the project begins to flourish, it is time to look at the intended outcomes. The evaluation should focus on student achievement as well as the overall success of the project. You might ask yourself, "Did this project meet the curriculum goals identified in Step 1?" and "Did this project meet the community need identified in Step 2?"
17. **Celebrate accomplishments.** Finally, it is time to celebrate. Allow the students to reflect on their own growth, how they felt about providing a service to others, and what they gained from this project. Consider having a party for the students and invite the community partners. It is important to set aside time to celebrate accomplishments and growth.

Although, service learning is on the rise in public schools, students with disabilities are often excluded. By following the steps described in this article, teachers of students with disabilities will be able to design and implement effective service learning projects. These projects are intended to balance both the needs of the learner and the needs of the community in a reciprocal relationship. Successful completion of a service learning project has the potential to accomplish three important goals for students with disabilities:

1. promote self-esteem and self-worth through the completion of a project of social importance,
2. engage students in curriculum- and school-related activities, and
3. reframe others' negative views of their worth and ability to contribute to society (Muscott, 2001).

Thus, service learning can play an important role in the development of academic, social, and civic skills for students with disabilities. Students also get to experience the excitement of helping others, thereby increasing motivation and allowing them to become active participants in their own education.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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