A Qualitative Study of Students with Behavioral Problems Participating in Service-Learning

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the use of service-learning in an alternative high school that primarily serves students at-risk for educational failure due to behavioral problems. Interviews with students, teachers, and administrators, as well as observations and archival documents yielded three major categories of student benefits:

(a) increased school engagement

(b) personal growth

(c) increased positive engagement with community.

These findings are discussed with regard to curriculum and placement decisions for students with severe behavioral problems. Based on these findings and the research literature, service-learning is suggested as a teaching strategy with significant potential for serving the unique educational needs of these highly at-risk students.

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Students with severe behavioral problems have an extraordinarily high risk for experiencing failure in school. Students receiving special education services under the classification of Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (EBD), for example, have lower grades and fail more courses than students in any other disability category (Lane, 2004; Wagner et al., 2005). Compared to their peers in general education, students with EBD are twice as likely to be retained, and three times more likely to drop out; compared to their peers with disabilities, students with EBD are four times more likely to be excluded from the general education classroom (Rosenberg, Westling, & McLeskey, 2008). Students who have not been classified with a disability but present severe behavioral problems in school, i.e., students at-risk for EBD, often face reactive administrative strategies such as suspension or expulsion, and/or curricular inflexibility which have little positive effect and in many cases reduce students' chances for success (Anderson & Kincaid, 2005; Kern, White, & Gresham, 2007).

The issue of appropriate classroom placement and curriculum for students with behavioral problems has been extensively discussed in the literature (Simpson, 2004). Some researchers have held that the

low-level remedial academic tasks and highly segregated nature of many self-contained classrooms or "low-track" classrooms designed for students with behavioral problems create student resistance to academic engagement, making this approach counter-productive with these particular students (Sekayi, 2001; Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 1993; Keith, 1997). In contrast, more experiential and inclusive educational approaches typified by active student engagement with peers and community adults, interesting and meaningful learning tasks, hands-on activities, and the establishment of supportive personal relationships might be more effective in retaining and promoting the success of all students at-risk for dropping out, including students with behavior problems (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Kleiner, et al., 2002; Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

Service-learning engages students with their school and civic communities, provides interesting learning tasks and hands-on activities, and promotes positive teacher-student interactions, among other benefits (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2002; National Commission on Service-Learning, 2002; Billig, 2004). Schools that incorporate a well-implemented service-learning program might therefore be more successful in meeting the emotional and academic needs of students with severe behavioral problems in school.

Research Question and Statement of the Problem

This qualitative study was intended to answer the following research question: What benefits, if any, have the students derived from participating in the service-learning activities of this school? The purpose of the study was to contribute to the knowledge base regarding the use of service-learning with at-risk students, particularly those considered at-risk due to problem behaviors. There is a consensus among many educational leaders and the public that we have not adequately addressed the issue of severe problem behaviors in school, or the specific behavioral, academic, social, organizational, legal, and psycho-emotional issues that affect our provision of services for troubled, at-risk youth (Cotton, 2001; Wagner, et al., 2005; Turnbull, Stowe, & Huerta, 2007; Coleman, Webber, & Algozzine, 1999; Office of Special Education Programs, 2000).

Service-Learning

In its most broad definition, service-learning is the linking of real-world, community-based experience and academic subject matter (Skinner & Chapman, 1999; National Commission on Service-Learning, 2002; Corporation for National and Community Service, 2002). In service-learning students design and carry out community service projects that require them to acquire and use academic knowledge and skills. It is generally agreed that the ideas of experiential and progressive education, as well the historical role of community service in American life form the essential theoretical and ideological foundations for service-learning practices (Kwak, Shen, & Kavanaugh, 2002; Waterman, 1997).

The National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC), one of the leading organizations supporting K-12 service-learning, has offered Eleven Essential Elements of Effective Service-Learning Practice, given below:

Cluster I: Learning

1.) Effective service-learning establishes clear educational goals that require the application of concepts, content, and skills from the academic disciplines and involves students in the construction of their own knowledge.

2.) In effective service-learning, students are engaged in tasks that challenge and stretch them cognitively and developmentally.

3.) In effective service-learning, assessment is used as a way to enhance student learning as well as to document and evaluate how well students have met content and skills standards.

Cluster II: Service

4.) Students are engaged in service tasks that have clear goals, meet real needs in the school or community and have significant consequences for themselves and others.

5.) Effective service-learning employs formative and summative evaluation in a systematic evaluation of the service effort and its outcomes.

Cluster III: Critical Components That Support Learning & Service

6.) Effective service-learning seeks to maximize student voice in selecting, designing, implementing and evaluating the service project.

7.) Effective service-learning values diversity through its participants, its practices, and its outcomes.

8.) Effective service-learning promotes communication and interaction with the community and encourages partnerships and collaboration.

9.) Students are prepared for all aspects of their service work including a clear understanding of task and role, the skills and information required by the task, awareness of safety precautions, as well as knowledge about the sensitivity to the people with whom they will be working.

10.) Student reflection takes place before, during and after service, using multiple methods that encourage critical thinking, and is a central force in the design and fulfillment of curricular objectives.

11.) Multiple methods are designed to acknowledge, celebrate and further validate Service (NYLC, 2005).

The Eleven Essential Elements is a widely accepted model for service-learning and the model used for service-learning practice in the site of this study. A study of these parameters reveals that successful service-learning programs must, among other goals: (a) engage students in addressing authentic community needs; (b) explicitly connect these projects to academic concepts and learning; (c) encourage student voice and active engagement; and (d) provide structured academic activities in which students reflect on their actions and the significance of the projects.

At-Risk Youth

The term "at-risk" refers generally to youth who are at a heightened risk for school failure and/or dropping out due to specific risk factors such as socioeconomic status, disability status, low academic achievement, truancy, and and/or behavioral problems in school (Donnelly, 1987). All the students at this school are by definition at-risk and are negatively affected by one or more of the risk factors given

above. A prevalent, although not ubiquitous risk factor associated with these students is severe behavioral difficulty in school.

Service-Learning and Students with Behavior Problems

Some researchers have posited a possible congruence between some of the values, skills, and knowledge that students in service-learning programs have been shown to gain, and the social, academic, and interpersonal deficits of at-risk youth with behavioral problems and/or E/BD, who are often typified by traits such as alienation, self-absorption, lack of empathy, and lack of engagement in school (Muscott, 2000; Meyers, 1999). Muscott (2000) argued that service-learning activities can help promote self-esteem, altruism, and a sense of efficacy in students negatively affected by the polar opposites of these traits: respectively, poor or negative sense of self-worth, a desire to take rather than give, and learned helplessness, traits typically associated with students who have significant behavior problems in school and/or E/BD (Brendtro, et al, 1990).

Clear parallels can be drawn between these developmental needs and the opportunities afforded students in well-designed service-learning projects. Service-learning has been shown in research to be effective in promoting and teaching interpersonal skills, self-esteem, and the belief among students that they can make a difference, competencies researchers have identified as critical to the success of at-risk students (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2002; Lipsitz, 1985).

Student Engagement and Service-Learning

Christenson (2002) offers four indicators of student engagement: (1) being on-task in the classroom; (2) behavioral engagement including attendance, behavioral compliance, and participation in extracurricular activities; (3) intellectual engagement with academic content; and (4) psycho-emotional engagement, including having a sense of belonging. Some researchers have held that dropping out of school may be the end result of a gradual process of disengagement for some students, who may display or express a deficient sense of belonging to the school, an extreme dislike of school, and/or habitual truancy (Finn, 1989; Keith, 1997; Rumberger, 1995).

Increasing the engagement of at-risk students is seen by many experts as a critically important component of increasing these students' chances for success in school (Grannis, 1994; Lehr, et al., 2004). Several researchers have indicated that school engagement by highly at-risk youth may be improved by promoting positive, caring teacher-student relationships and incorporating more engaging class work and real-life, hands-on learning (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Reschly & Christenson, 2006), One researcher found that at-risk students who exhibited higher levels of engagement in school made higher academic gains than their less-engaged at-risk peers (Finn, 1993).

Service-learning has been shown in the literature to enhance teacher-student relationships, provide hands-on learning, and improve student engagement (Billig, 2004; National Commission on Service-Learning, 2002). One study (Klute & Billig, 2002) compared the school engagement and academic achievement scores as measured by the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) test, of one group of students in grades 2-5 who participated in service-learning activities, as compared with a similar group who did not participate in the activities. Students participating in service-learning activities had statistically significant higher measures of cognitive engagement in school (defined by

actions such as staying on task and making effort), and statistically significant higher scores on the writing and several social studies strands of the MEAP. Scores approached statistical significance in earth science strands of the MEAP as well.

Hecht (2002) conducted a study of Delaware students who were retained in seventh or eighth grade. These students read to pre-schoolers at a local community center in a service-learning project connected to their studies as part of their language arts class. Using interviews, observations, and document reviews, Hecht demonstrated that students who engaged in these service-learning activities found unexpected enjoyment in their participation, expressed positive regard for the activities, and demonstrated increased engagement in school. Laird & Black (2002) conducted a study of the Lions Quest program in which they examined students' high-risk behaviors and/or their potential for dropping out of school. Seniors in this study who participated in service-learning maintained a lower risk of dropping out compared to their non-participating peers, and students with more service hours demonstrated higher scores on measures of positive community values and interpersonal relationship skills and/or knowledge.

Method

Qualitative methodology was chosen for this study in order to attempt to capture some of the complexities that prominent researchers have noted as inherent in service-learning practice (Serow, 1997; Schumer, 1997). Creswell (1998) defined qualitative research, in part, as a technique in which the researcher "builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting " (p.15). As Schumer notes, qualitative research has been used effectively with service-learning programs: "The information compiled through this process paints a picture of complex human interactions framed in a context of rich learning environments" (2003, in Waterman, ed., p.25).

Participants and Sampling

The goal of this qualitative research design was to capture the maximum amount of information possible regarding the research questions. Thus, purposive sampling was used to gather pertinent information from those who were most likely to have it (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 1990; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The researcher consulted with the service-learning coordinator to ascertain which staff and students might have the most relevant information for this study, and these students and staff were invited to be interviewed. No data collection for this study was begun until all required interview consent forms were signed by the interviewees and/or their parents, and returned to the researcher.

Five teachers selected for their experience in conducting service-learning activities at this school were interviewed. Of the students who were invited by the researcher, nine students consented to be interviewed. The two founders of the school, the principal, the service-learning coordinator, and two representatives from local environmental agencies that collaborate with the school were also interviewed.

Data Collection

Three sources of data were used in this study: interview data, archival data, and observation data. Thus "in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" was used in this study (Creswell, 1998, p.26). Semi-structured interviews were the primary source of information in

this study. This qualitative technique for gathering data is used when the interviewer wants specific information, but also wants to "find out what others think and know," without imposing his or her worldview on the interviewee (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p.5). The interviews ranged in length from ten minutes to over ninety minutes, and on average lasted about 25 minutes. Two or three broad, or global, questions were used in this interview protocol, with extensive follow-up question and probes used to have the conversation develop naturally and also cover the intended areas of examination. Follow-up interviews proved unnecessary in all but one case, when one student was briefly re-interviewed in order to include her thoughts regarding a specific service-learning project she had participated in. The interviews were all tape-recorded and transcribed, and checked for accuracy by the researcher and the interviewees.

Classroom observations were conducted several times a week over a period of six weeks in the spring semester of 2006, and all of the interviews were also conducted within that time frame. Data from the classroom observations served to triangulate data found in the interviews and provided the researcher with additional background information and familiarity with the research setting. Archival documents provided by the service-learning coordinator were utilized to triangulate data and document the service-learning activities.

Data Analysis

Category construction (Merriam, 1998) was utilized in the present study for the purposes of organizing and analyzing the interview data. This is a technique in which the researcher, after reading, reviewing, and re-reading the data, creates categories of data that are then used to sort, analyze, and compare. As Merriam stated, "It should be clear that categories are abstractions derived from the data, not the data themselves" (1998, p.181), and noted that categories should be: (a) reflective of the purpose of the research, (b) exhaustive, (c) mutually exclusive, (d) sensitizing, and (e) conceptually congruent (1998, p.183-184). Categories of the findings were created by the researcher through a lengthy process of reading and re-reading the transcripts and categorizing the data according to these guidelines.

Trustworthiness

Methods used to ensure the trustworthiness of the data included the use of multiple sources of information, also referred to as triangulation (Creswell, 1998). The use of interviews, observations, and information contained in archival data were used to provide triangulation (Merriam, 1998; Maxwell, 1996). As Creswell describes triangulation, this is using data from various sources to "build a coherent justification for themes" (2003, p.196). Thus, data taken from the observations and the archived data were used to check against and either tend to confirm or deny the categories of data we found (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Copies of the interview transcripts were printed and given to each interviewee for their review and approval as a measure to ensure trustworthiness.

Validity

Maxwell (2005) held that using certain methods or research techniques cannot guarantee the validity or essential truthfulness of the results. In Maxwell's view, the primary threat to validity comes from evidence rather than methods, making the distinction that research methods are simply a way of getting to the evidence that will ultimately determine the validity of the results. Maxwell's major recommendation in this regard is to specifically seek out evidence in the data that would tend to contradict the researcher's constructed categories, beliefs, predictions, and other biases. This

recommendation was strictly attended to in the present study. That is, after constructing hypothetical categories of data from an early reading of the transcripts, the researcher re-read the transcripts looking for information that would tend to contradict the validity of the constructed categories. When such contradictory evidence was found, the discrete categories as constructed were discarded, and the research data therein were considered for re-categorization.

Limitations of the Study

One primary limitation is that this study was conducted in an alternative high school characterized by a Deweyan, constructivist approach to education. As such, the findings of this study might not be easily generalized to regular school settings that are characterized by a strong emphasis on standardized curricula and testing. Another limitation of the study is that only nine students out of approximately 38 were interviewed. It would have been more comprehensive to have heard the viewpoints of the 29 students who did not volunteer to be interviewed for this study.

Description of the Site and Students

This alternative high school in the rural Midwest serves seven school districts, and is primarily funded by those districts. High schools within the served districts can elect to send a specified number of students to the school each year. Most of the schools send approximately five students a year. These are typically students who have either presented severe behavioral difficulties at school or simply stopped attending with any regularity. Other common reasons for placement in this school include the commission of one-time serious offenses in schools, and student self-advocacy for this placement. The school accepts, in addition to those general education students sent from the seven districts, students who are classified in special education who have been given long-term suspensions or expelled, so that there is no cessation of educational services for these students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA).

Administrators report that, in general, approximately 40% to 50% of the students in this school are classified as having some form of disability, most often Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities (EBD) and/or Learning Disability (LD). The school typically serves between 30 and 45 students, ranging in age from 15-19 years. The racial demographic at this school is nearly 100% Caucasian, typical for this region, and approximately 75% of the students are male. 56% of the students receive free or reduced lunch, 70% have some form of court involvement, and 33% are served by Social and Rehabilitative Services.

Results

Most of the service-learning projects at this school since 2004 have had the overarching theme of environmental awareness and advocacy. Multicultural education served as the theme for several projects. Service-learning projects at this school are usually implemented on a nine-week basis, with some projects continuing from year to year. Brief descriptions of projects current or recently completed in the spring semester of 2006 follows:

- The Nature Trail: Students created trails and informative signs regarding aspects of naturalism at a 130-acre wooded site. The students utilize this site on a regular basis for activities in which they teach younger students about naturalism and the environment, utilizing the natural resources of the site in their instruction

- The Water Quality Project: Students collected data samples from local streams and performed water tests such as PH analysis, using water analysis materials provided by a local environmental organization. Students learned about water usage, pollution, environmental issues, and chemical analysis.
- Reading to pre-schoolers: Congruent with the theme of environmental advocacy, the school purchased a collection of children's books related to environmentalism. The students go to a local preschool and read these books to the children.
- The Community Garden: Students designed and constructed a community garden in the local town park, using plants they raised in the school's greenhouse. In addition, the students helped pre-school children create and decorate their own individualized "stepping stones" at the garden.
- Teaching 3rd and 4th graders about science: Students presented lessons to 3rd and 4th grade students at the local elementary school once a week. Some of the lessons included: composting, the role of worms in maintaining soil health, the mineral cycle in soil, and caring for the soil. Students also set up a composting bin for the 4th graders at their school. Other science topics students taught lessons on include mammals and Monarch butterflies.
- Native American Studies Project: Students chose a research topic related to Native Americans and created an activity for teaching younger students about their topic. Students were required to read, research, write, and plan for teaching their lessons. They visited a local elementary school where they set up six hands-on learning stations where the younger children created Kachina dolls.
- Recycling Project: Students have placed receptacles for paper and aluminum cans at various places in the school building. They maintain a large recycling bin and transport the recycled material to a community center each week.

Perceived Effects of Service-Learning

Using the technique of category construction described previously in the Methods section, the interviewees' responses revealed three major categories of data:

(1) Engagement in school

(2) Personal growth

(3) Engagement with community needs.

These data categories are described below.

Engagement in school
Students were required to use academic skills and knowledge in all of the service-learning activities described. In creating the Nature Trail, for example, students researched tree and plant types and the history of the area, and created brochures and signs outlining their research findings. Students in English classes created a written proposal to the local town council for the Community Garden project, and students reported that they are typically required to write reflection papers about their service-learning experiences.

Several students specifically used the term "hands-on," with regard to the service-learning projects and indicated that this made learning academic concepts much more interesting. As one student said:

The kids here, they learn with more hands-on activities and things like that. We get out into the environment, and we do things for the environment. That is what makes school fun for us. That's what

makes us want to come back.

This same student commented on how these service-learning projects appear to promote school engagement for students with behavior problems, saying, *"I've seen kids that totally act up and everything, and then when we go out and we go do something hands-on, they are so excited and they want to do it so bad, they are right there in the action."*

Another student described how these projects make school more interesting:

"School bored me pretty much…. It [this school's curriculum] is a completely different way of learning."

The principal explained how curriculum at this school is often centered around service-learning projects, which in turn are based on community needs that the students and teachers have collectively identified and selected. In this process, students become self-motivated, as the principal noted, to "get back" with teachers on what they have learned through their own study and internet-based research.

She explained how this worked in practice, using the example of the Native American History project:

.…when we're going to go teach at the grade school a unit on American Indians and how they built canoes. We look at our kids and say, 'Hey, let's get ready for this. What can we do to make this come off well? You want to build a canoe. That's a neat idea. What do they make that out of? How long was that canoe? How many people rode in that canoe?' All of a sudden our kids are saying, 'I can figure that out. I'll get back with you on that.' They are getting on the computers, and they are researching, and they are reading.

Academic skills were used extensively in the activities where students presented instruction to younger children. Students were required to learn content regarding the mineral cycle in soil, composting, and the role of worms in soil health, as well as having the responsibility for planning instruction. Academic activity was connected in these cases with a significant motivation for learning, in that students had the responsibility for teaching the material to younger students. According to the service-learning coordinator, the students did not want to be embarrassed by not knowing their material sufficiently well. One student corroborated this observation:

I was able to see how the teachers deal with it, and what they have to do to prepare a lesson. They have to look it up in the book. They make sure they have the answers so then they are not being told they are wrong and they won't have any arguments.

Another student noted that teaching something to others also promotes one's own understanding of the subject, saying that:

"through the little kids asking questions, I would learn more because I had to think about it more."

Math skills were used in many of the service-learning projects which required building and design. For example, the creation of the community garden required students to use math skills in mapping out the proposed designs. Other activities which required measurement and use of math skills included the construction of the recycling bin and community garden shed, and measuring and reporting scientific data in the water quality project. The development of student qualities related to leadership, initiative, and intrinsic motivation to engage in school were also found to be effects of the service-learning

activities at this school. One student described as quite defiant was noted by his history teacher to be the most productive student in the outdoor classroom project, functioning as the informal student leader in this project. Another teacher noted that some students have expressed an apparent sense of ownership of the Nature Trail site, and some have worked at the site on weekends.

Personal Growth

Students and teachers interviewed made comments to the effect that a common local perception of this school is that it is for "bad kids." As one student put it, "When you tell people you are from [the site of the study], people just kind of shy away from you… They either think you are stupid or they would be scared of you."

Part of the intended role of service-learning at this school is to help students see beyond these negative characterizations of themselves, as one of the founders explained:

"Our kids have been kind of considered, unfortunately, the bottom of the barrel. That is how they are looked at. I think it gets to the point where these kids start internalizing that, too. They feel like they have nothing to offer. People see them as draining assets in communities. Through service learning, I think the kids really have come to see themselves as assets to the community."

One student described the project in which she taught younger children about Native American Kachina dolls, clearly indicating her belief that her efforts were successful and appreciated:

"I helped them make a little Kachina. I cut out the little feathers for them out of construction paper, and they used paper plates for the little wand, and they got to color little Kachina faces on to them. I think everybody had a blast with that."

Another student said, in reference to the projects in which they taught younger children, "It made me feel great knowing that I taught somebody how to do something. It was a really good experience."

All the school administrators and several of the teachers interviewed indicated that promotion of student self-worth is a primary goal of the service-learning program at this school. The service-learning coordinator characterized this goal as the most important effect, in her opinion, of service-learning on her students. She described the effects she perceived on her students after a worker from the Humane Society thanked the students for their help on a service-learning project at the animal shelter:

"That is the piece that makes service learning the most real. It's not me telling the kids, 'Boy you did great, or boy she needed our help.' It is that moment of interchange that is completely personal between the student and whoever it is in the community that they are having contact with."

Thus, positive feedback from community adults not professionally connected with the school or school system was seen by the service-learning coordinator as qualitatively different—and perhaps in some ways significantly more valuable to students—than the praise of teachers or administrators. This community recognition—one might also term it "real-world" recognition—appears to be highly valued by students.

In one example, a search of the archived records revealed a student's response on a survey about service-learning, which said, "Most of the adults I know think I'm worthless, but the adults I meet through service-learning seem to think that I help out quite a bit." Another student commented on one aspect of the Nature Trail project, and the perceived effect this had on her self-image:

"*We made the bathroom accessible for people in wheelchairs. We did a trail so that people in wheelchairs could get through the trails and stuff like that. Once you do that and people can actually use it, it makes you feel really cool about yourself.*"

Service-learning projects at this school, according to the service-learning coordinator, begin by giving the students a sense that they have something to contribute, and that their contributions are essential to the project's success. She described her essential philosophy of presenting service-learning projects:

"*We put them in a position where we say, 'I trust that you can do this, here's your opportunity. I'm counting on you. Here's what you need to do, go and do it,' and they rise to the occasion almost every time… and so they start to feel better about their own ability.*"

Engagement with community needs
The evidence indicates that the service-learning activities have a real-life purpose and are explicitly connected to the world beyond school. Students in the water quality project, for example, went to local streams and measured and recorded scientific data relevant to the environmental health of local streams. Several students commented in the interviews on their belief that they were helping the environment and/or the community through participating in this project. As one student said of her role in the project, "*I think I learned a lot from it. I like going out and being able to do stuff for the community. I like to volunteer.*"

Several students talked about the projects in which they taught younger children, and discussed their awareness that they were contributing to the children's understanding and practice of academic skills and knowledge. As one student said of an elementary school child he tutored by listening to the boy read:

"*…he read three books to me because he loved the fact that he was reading and a high school kid is listening to him, somebody who is three times his age is sitting there listening to everything he has to say.*"

One student commented on student responsibilities, particularly with regard to behavior, in the projects involving teaching younger children. This student said, "*With little kids, they look up to you. They are like, 'Hey, this is a big person. I want to be just like them.' You have to set a good example for them.*"

Another example of students' active and positive engagement with the community is seen in the creation of the Nature Trail site. The trails, signs, and trail guides created by the students benefit local citizens who want to learn about the flora and fauna of the area, and provide an "outdoor classroom" for schoolchildren in local school districts.

The recycling project involves students in an activity designed to help the community manage its waste in an ecologically responsible manner. In the Community Garden project, students beautified a community space in the small town where the school resides. One student described the project and the reactions of local residents:

"*We put a garden in up at this park just down the road a little ways. We put a garden in, and we decorated it for them because that is where kids go. It was looking a little dull and rusty, so we painted stuff up and put a garden in for them.*"

They said that it was great. They were very pleased with it. They were just amazed that we actually have a school that is cleaning up the environment…

The English teacher described a previous service-learning project in which students tended the gardens of community adults who were disabled by old age or disabilities:

"*….they would maintain their gardens and get them ready for the spring and plant flowers. That is reaching out into the community. The academic part is they were growing plants in the greenhouse. They were learning horticulture. A community that might have forgotten you….all of a sudden you have a purpose.*"

This school has, through its environmental service-learning program, formed collaborative partnerships with several environmental non-profit organizations and governmental agencies. Through these partnerships the students have participated in stream monitoring and environmental assessments as well as public awareness activities and school-based activities regarding environmental concepts and issues.

Summary

The primary categories of findings in this study—engagement in school, personal growth, and engagement with community—are consistent with the findings of other service-learning researchers who often group service-learning outcomes into three groups: academic, personal, and civic/social gains (Billig, 2004; National Commission on Service-Learning, 2002). Furthermore, some of these outcomes appear to be strongly inter-connected, a finding that is consistent with some researcher's view of service-learning as a complex, holistic form of pedagogy (Schumer, 1997; Kendall, 1990; Keilsmeier, 2004).

The intent of this study was to determine what benefits, if any, the students at this school derived from participating in the service-learning activities. The first category of data relevant to this research question regards the promotion of student engagement. The service-learning program at this school appears from the findings to be effective in raising the level of student engagement in academic activities and social interaction in school, a critically important factor in promoting the success of at-risk youth (Lehr, et al., 2004; Keith, 1997; Finn, 1993; Reschly & Christenson, 2006). In part, this is due to the "fun" nature of service-learning activities, as several students reported. Others said it was more interesting to learn this way, and several students used the term "*hands-on*" to describe service-learning. The students at this school often demonstrate low achievement in reading and writing, and it is reasonable to assume these projects provide motivation for practicing these skills. Motivating factors might include having a published product which they can take pride in, meeting the challenge of writing accurate scientific descriptions of plants and trees, making improvements at the Nature Trail site, conducting internet research on a project, or preparing to teach younger children about the environment.

The second primary category of data found in the interviews regards the promotion of personal growth. According to Muscott (2000), students with severe behavioral problems often have deficits in civil/social traits such as empathy and altruism, and he recommends service-learning as a method for

promoting these traits as well as promoting students' sense of self-worth. In this study, students with EBD and behavioral problems participating in service-learning projects reported engaging in altruistic efforts for others—participating in the teaching of younger children, for example, or creating and improving the Nature Trail site—as well as assuming responsibility for the academic and physical tasks needed in order to accomplish these essentially altruistic goals.

While self-esteem, sense of belonging to a community or school, and the sense that one is making positive contributions are internal traits that cannot be easily measured and require some inference (Reshly & Christenson, 2006), it is clear that this service-learning program provided students with motives and opportunities to practice social behaviors and contribute to the well-being of others. Providing these opportunities gives students with serious deficits in social and/or behavioral skills a chance to "try out" more positive, civil, and perhaps even altruistic attitudes and actions toward others. It might be inferred that experiencing success in these endeavors would alter students' self-image in similarly positive ways, although very few students actually commented on their feelings of self-worth in the interviews.

The third primary category of data found in the interviews regards student engagement with community. Community needs the projects have addressed include literacy promotion for elementary school students, the creation and maintenance of environmental areas devoted to outdoor research and education, the gathering and dissemination of information related to the environment, and the creation and maintenance of a community recycling program. In addition, these activities enhanced the local reputation of the school and its students, and forged tangible links between the school, these students, community adults, and environmental professionals working in governmental and non-profit organizations.

Discussion and Implications

It has been argued that one of the root causes of many educational and social problems lies in the lack of explicit connections between our educational system and the needs of our communities (National Commission on Service-Learning, 2002; Taylor, 2002). Students at this school are actively engaged in meeting community needs that they have helped identify, and the connections between education and the needs of communities are made explicit. It might be interpreted from the findings of this study that outer engagement, i.e., community action, seems to have the potential to increase students' inner engagement in many areas: their interest in school, their willingness to cooperate with their fellow students, and perhaps most importantly their discovery that they have talents and strengths that are appreciated by others.

This study began by noting the extraordinarily high risk for school failure held by students with severe behavioral problems, and noting that students with EBD are very often served in highly restrictive educational settings such as self-contained special education classrooms, a trend that has been increasing in recent years (Rosenberg, Westling, & MacLeskey, 2008; Furney, et al, 2003). In theory the low teacher-student ratio of these classrooms and the opportunities for individualized, one-on-one instruction should make segregated classrooms more effective (Lane, et al., 2004). There is evidence to suggest, however, that segregated classrooms for students with EBD have had limited success in academically challenging these students and promoting their success in school (Lane, 2004). Some researchers have examined the low-level remedial tasks and punitive nature of many segregated education settings and concluded that these environmental factors contribute to students' resistance and hostility toward school, increasing students' disengagement from school and paving the way for more school failure (Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 1993; Sekayi, 2001). The extraordinarily poor school and

post-school outcomes for students with EBD (Wagner & Davis, 2006) would appear to be evidence of the inadequacies of our present system regarding these students.

The benefits of using service-learning with students with behavioral problems could be significant. The findings of this study indicate that students participating in well-designed, meaningful service-learning projects have unique opportunities to interact with community adults and youth, help improve their communities, use and contribute personal talents and strengths, achieve some measure of personal growth, and connect academic knowledge with the real world. Researchers should continue to investigate the use of service-learning with these extremely challenging students.

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