



Special Projects for Special People: Students with Disabilities Serve Others through Service-Learning Projects

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Abstract

This study focuses on the effect of service-learning on 5 students with disabilities in an inclusive 6th grade class. As students participated in service activities which met a community need and were linked to the curriculum, they achieved learning goals and were provided the real life applications of their learning. Students experienced the excitement of helping others, which increased motivation, willingness to help, and concern for others. Service-learning projects bolstered my students' self-confidence, helped them realize that they each have something to give, and that they can make a difference. Service-learning projects seem to be a powerful tool to improve students' motivation, academic success, social skills, and self-confidence. Service-learning may be particularly effective in the inclusive classroom.

Keywords

service-learning, students with special needs, inclusion, elementary, sixth grade, service projects, motivation, caring, self-confidence

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Introduction

In my experience of working with students with disabilities, I have noticed that they tend to be unmotivated, lack self confidence, and have lower social and academic skills than their non-disabled peers. Scott (2006) agrees that “many students with disabilities display learned helplessness, suffer from low-self esteem, and have low levels of self-efficacy” (p. 25). They often seem not to care about school and see no connection between school and the real world. Schoolwork is often very difficult for my students and after years of frustration and failure, they quit trying, believe they are failures, and use avoidance behaviors to cope.

My students needed a sense of purpose beyond themselves in order to feel valued and motivated. Like Parker (2006), my students needed a way to help make meaningful and productive contributions to society. Research suggests that service-learning is a powerful approach for linking schools with their communities (Jennings, 2001). The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (n.d.) has defined service-learning as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (para. 1).

Service-learning projects have proven to improve social skills and behavioral problems (Tannenbaum & Brown-Welty, 2006) and also academic success (Vogelgesang & Alexander, 2000). Service-learning is more than community service. As students, teachers, and community members participate in service activities that meet a community need

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and link to the curriculum, they achieve learning goals and are provided the real life applications of their learning (Bonnette, 2006; Coulter, 2004; Dymond, Renzaglia, & Chun, 2007; Service-learning, 2007, para. 3).

Students with disabilities are often the recipients of service-learning, but they have much to give as well. Research has shown that service-learning projects which fully include students are beneficial to the students who typically receive services (Abernathy & Obenchain, 2001). Students with disabilities develop academic, social, and civic skills through service-learning and gain independence and self-esteem as they help others (Scott, 2006). Having opportunities to work with others and share ideas promotes efficacy, and self-efficacy affects motivation and student achievement (Bandura, 1993; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Seifert, 2004). Students come together to work toward a cause greater than themselves that is meaningful and beneficial

through service-learning projects. Since service-learning encompasses a wide variety of tasks, it is easily tied to the curriculum and students’ IEP goals. Service-learning is effective in the inclusive classroom because it is conducive to differentiation, allows students with disabilities to learn with their non-disabled peers, builds community, and promotes critical thinking (Kluth, 2007; Dymond et al., 2007).

As the school year began, my husband and I were on our fourth month of his fifteen month deployment to Iraq. Having the students write letters and send packages to soldiers was a project I wanted to try because it could help the students with their writing skills as well as helping my husband and his

unit keep their spirits up. The students could make connections with the soldiers and see a purpose for their writing beyond school, which had the potential to benefit them in more ways than academics. Purposeful writing helps motivate students to develop their writing skills (Atwell, 2002; Calkins, 2006; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2004). I knew this kind of service-learning would benefit the soldiers in Iraq, but wondered how the service-learning projects would affect my students. This qualitative study sought to understand how service-learning would impact elementary students with disabilities.

Methodology

Participants

My study focused on five sixth grade students with diverse interests who qualify for special education with varied levels and types of disabilities. The four girls— Darlene, Susan, Nicole, and Maria— and one boy—Jeff — all participated in the service-learning projects along with the rest of their twenty classmates. These students received nearly all special education services in an inclusive classroom co-taught by the classroom teacher and myself. The students attended a public elementary school in a Midwestern suburb that has about three sections at each grade level.

Procedure

Certain procedures were followed to ensure as much success as possible from the projects. The students were given several opportunities to develop the skills they need as adults, such as responsibility, tolerance, courage, and collaboration (Lewis, Schraps, Watson, 1996).

Because students' interest, motivation, and effort increase when allowed to make meaningful choices in their learning, (Erlauer,

2003), I started by giving all the sixth grade students surveys with possible project suggestions, and they chose which projects they would like to do. Abernathy and Obenchain (2001) believe that service-learning projects in which students are fully included in all phases help students move from the passive receiving service role to the active service provider role. As a result, I wrote the names of the seven most wanted projects on the board and explained that students would form committees to plan, organize, and implement the projects. Students decided which of the seven committees to be on, choosing among soldier letters and care packages, adopting a grandparent, food drive, bake sale, cards/giggle bags for children in the hospital, pet food drive for animal shelter, and preschool buddies.

The committees planned when we would do the projects and how they should be implemented. Because there were so many projects the students wanted to do and not enough time to do them all at once, we decided to spread out the projects throughout the year. Originally all the groups met at the same time for about twenty minutes, but we found they had too many questions for the classroom teacher and me to adequately answer in the time given. We found it more effective for me to meet with the committees individually at least once a month for about fifteen minutes each, some more frequently than others based on our focus projects at that time. The classroom teacher and I served as guides by answering questions, scheduling time for the committees to meet, meeting with them, making sure they had the materials needed, and providing feedback, while allowing the students to remain in charge of the projects.

We completed our first service project in September by writing letters to soldiers in

Iraq, hoping we could become pen pals and write back and forth all year. The students spent most of October setting goals, planning, and organizing their projects with their committees, as well as deciding which projects should be completed each month. While my husband was home on leave from Iraq in October, he presented to the class and told them what the life of a U.S. soldier serving in Iraq is like.

In November, the students went to visit with residents at Pine Apartments, an elderly apartment complex next door to school. The committee met with the activities director and decided to go for an hour the second Friday of each month for the rest of the school year. Students also organized a canned food drive with Student Council, began collecting items, and planned and organized sending packages and cards to soldiers for Christmas. At the end of the month, we were contacted by the PTO (Parent Teacher Organization) to help with the Walking Club, so students formed another committee to create a schedule.

We were also contacted by the principal to set up the Christmas tree, create snack bags, and make a sign for the school bank. Again, students chose which activity they wanted to help with, and spent an hour completing those tasks.

In December, students began helping supervise the Walking Club, packaged up and sent care packages to soldiers, finished the food drive, and visited their adopted grandparents at Pine Apartments. The students wanted to do other projects as well, but we ran out of time and decided to complete the projects next semester. I also had the students

do some reflecting because reflection is a key component of service-learning projects (Bonnette, 2006). I interviewed students, parents, and teachers to learn about the effects of service-learning projects.

Data Collection

I collected data from the entire class through surveys, observation notes, work samples, and interviews. I gave the students surveys to decide which projects to do, and reflect on their feelings before and after we completed a service project. A great deal of observation notes were recorded throughout the school days, particularly when meeting with committees and working on projects. I recorded verbal quotes, written comments,

questions and comments students made, body language, and their willingness and excitement to complete a task. Student work samples were collected when they wrote letters to soldiers, wrote questions for the residents at Pine Apartments, created class presentations, created and read announcements, and created a thermometer to

show our progress for the canned food drive. At the end of the study, I interviewed students, parents, and teachers to gain their input on the effects of service-learning.

Data Analysis

I collected and compiled all the data from surveys, observation notes, work samples, and interviews, then read it out loud, cut, sorted, and coded the data into themes until the data was exhausted. I went back and sorted the data by students instead of themes. I then compared my findings to that of other

Darlene hadn't completed any service projects before starting sixth grade. At the end of the semester, Darlene commented that she felt great about service-learning projects

researchers and found them to be rather consistent.

Findings

My study focused on five sixth grade students with disabilities: Darlene, Susan, Jeff, Nicole, and Maria. The majority of them started the year with less self-confidence, lower social and academic skills, and less motivation than their non-disabled classmates. Each student has her own story to tell about the effect of service-learning.

Darlene

“Do we get to meet in our committees again today?” Darlene asked me the moment I walked in the room. I shook my head no, and she disappointedly responded, “Darn.” Darlene qualifies for special education by having a specific learning disability and speech language impairment. In the beginning of the year, she greatly struggled with self-confidence, put a great deal of pressure on herself, and often conveyed the message that she wasn’t good enough and would never get proficient grades. The service-learning projects allowed her to shine.

Darlene chose to be on the committee to send letters and care packages to soldiers. She was eager for a real American Soldier (my husband) to come and present to the class. The week he was going to come, she asked me every day, “Is your husband coming today?” When he arrived, she commented, “I’ve been waiting forever to see you!” and asked him, “What kind of food do you eat?” She also wrote down the numbers 0-10 in Arabic, keeping them on her desk for months after the presentation. Darlene took ownership of the service project and asked several questions in the planning stages such as, “How soon should we start sending packages? What should we send?” Her committee

presented to their classmates as well as the two other sections of sixth grade. Each time, she became the leader of the group and wrote down what they needed to say. Darlene volunteered to go to the post office over the weekend and figure out how much it costs to mail a package to Iraq as well as which size of a box we should use. She helped her committee backwards plan to make sure all the packages could be sent out in time for the soldiers to receive Christmas gifts.

She raised \$15.76 to mail the care packages to Iraq, and told me, “Mrs. Olnes, I brought stuff for the soldiers” (homemade cookies that she made all by herself)! Darlene was smiling from ear to ear as she helped package up all the goodies, cards, and magazines. She addressed the packages and was particularly proud that they all worked together and sent four Christmas packages to soldiers in my husband’s unit stationed in Iraq.

Darlene did not stop there. She helped in any way she could with the other projects as well. She had the opportunity to go outside for an extra reward recess, but she chose to stay inside and help count cans for the canned food drive. She also volunteered to be a part of the Walking Club committee and was a leader in creating the schedule. When it was her turn to help supervise, she arrived on time and did an outstanding job of making sure the students were following the rules. She also adopted a grandparent. When asked how she felt about adopting a grandparent before we went to Pine Apartments, she said, “I am unsure if I am going to like him or her.” Afterward, she said she felt, “Great because she and me relate!”

Darlene hadn’t completed any service projects before starting sixth grade. At the end of the semester, Darlene commented that she felt great about service-learning projects, “be-

cause it feels so grand to help out the hungry, and the soldiers, and all those cans. It just feels so great to help out!" How did she think she helped others and how does that make her feel? "It makes me feel great and good about the decisions that I make. I sent care packages to people who had no family." Darlene plans to continue to help others by "donating supplies and going to the pond [pound] to take care of animals until they find a home." She learned that, "I am very helpful." She enjoyed the projects so much that she couldn't choose a favorite. Another major benefit of the projects for Darlene was that her parents and teachers have noticed that she has much more of a positive attitude and received many more proficient scores, even on district and state assessments. When asked if her attitude toward schoolwork has changed, she responded, "Yes, I am trying my best!"

Susan

"You better get out of my way or I'll run you over with my Cadillac!" Susan excitedly shared her adopted grandparent's comment about her walker with the class. Susan qualifies for special education by having speech language impairment. Her father describes her as "our most empathetic child." Teachers and other students would agree. Susan genuinely cared about others before we started the service projects. She was on the Bake Sale committee. While they did not get to implement their project during the semester, she asked excellent questions in the planning stage, such as, "Could we send something to the newspaper? Can we have a bake sale at the next junior high basketball game?" She enjoyed the committees; when others'

asked when do we get to meet with our committees again, she responded, "Oh, I love those!" Susan participated in all our service projects, and even did some on her own. One morning she and another student came up to me and said, "We went Christmas caroling with our church last night. We went to the nursing home and sang to the old people. We had a lot of fun singing the songs." I could tell they were happy about it and felt like they cheered people up.

Susan's favorite projects were going to Pine Apartments and making cards for the soldiers because, "we got to visit the elderly and learn about them, and we got to do some coloring and drawing to help people in Iraq." She was excited to adopt a grandparent because "it's going to be really fun to ask them questions about something important."

After initially meeting her adopted grandparent, she wanted to go again to talk with her about WWI. The next day during writing she used the vivid words "croaky voice" to describe her grandparent.

Susan felt that she played an important role in the projects, and that the projects helped her "listen more carefully, be nicer, and have more manners." Knowing that she helped the people at Pine Apartments have a better day made her feel really good. She learned that "some of them have to struggle with really hard stuff!" Susan wants to continue helping others by telling them stories, reading, or just making them feel better. She gained insight into herself and learned, "that I can make a difference for someone."

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Jeff

“Have you sent the soldier letters yet?” Jeff asked as I walked into class. I responded, “Yes, the soldiers should be receiving them today or tomorrow.” His face lit up and he went back to tell his group. Jeff qualifies for special education with a specific learning disability and speech language impairment. He seemed eager to work on the projects since they were first introduced, and frequently asked whether he’d get to work with his Bake Sale committee that day. He shared many good ideas with his group, and planned and organized a bake sale for the second semester.

Jeff participated in all the service projects and volunteered to be on the Walking Club committee. He helped create a schedule and continued to remind students when it is their turn to supervise. He was excited about presenting to the other classes and explaining what they needed to do. He also eagerly volunteered to help set up the school Christmas tree. While setting up the tree, they ran into a problem when they got to the end of the lights and there wasn’t a plug in. Jeff thought for a while and used his problem solving skills to decide to take the last string of lights off. When the Christmas tree was finished, Jeff declared, “It’s a masterpiece!”

Jeff was excited about adopting grandparents because he wanted to see them. He even brought his trumpet and played some Christmas tunes for the adopted grandparents. His face was beaming when he finished the songs. He said going to Pine Apartments “was very fun. We did a lot of stuff.” His writing improved as he wrote about his grandparent, “She said in disgust, ‘I ate a furry slimy caterpillar.’” Jeff, his teachers, and parents agree that his attitude toward schoolwork has changed after doing the projects. “It has changed my life. I help more and do more

community work.” He thought the projects were really fun and talked about them a lot with his family at home. He particularly enjoyed decorating the tree and feels good that he is helping others. He is taking turns and sharing more. His mother agrees and feels the projects “make him an even stronger person.”

Nicole

Nicole wrote, “I’m vary pround [very proud] of you! Thank you for help us your Brave!” to the soldiers in Iraq. Nicole has a mild mental handicap as well as hearing and speech impairments. She was on the committee to write cards and send Giggle bags to children in hospitals. She eagerly helped her committee plan what kinds of items they should place in the Giggle bags to help the children smile and laugh. She recommended they put Hannah Montana items in the bags. Her committee planned their project for second semester. Nicole participated in the other projects, including her favorite, adopting a grandparent. Before meeting her adopted grandparent, she was “excited because I’m happy about it.” On the way out, she felt her experience “was the best because she loves ice skating and so do I!” Nicole did not feel like she played an important role in the projects. She volunteered to help make a bank sign for the school bank, even when it meant staying in from reward recess to finish the sign. She liked sending the care packages to soldiers. While Nicole never took a leadership role in any of the projects, her involvement in the projects was still beneficial. She said they are fun sometimes and learned that “trying to agree with everybody is hard,” and it “makes me feel good to help people.”

Maria

“No, we *want* to stay after school!” Maria responded when I told her group it was

time to finish with snack bags and clean up so they could go home. She was having so much fun; she did not want to stop. Maria just moved to the district this year and qualifies for special education with a specific learning disability. She loves animals and leads the Pet Food Drive for Local Animal Shelters committee. She took charge of that group and said she would find the phone numbers to the local animal shelters. She asked important questions about timing and implementation of the pet food drive such as, "Should we keep the boxes (to collect food) out the whole time?" Her mom commented, "She's gung ho on donations for pet food!" While we were not able to complete that project as a class, Maria did not let it stop her. She went to the Humane Society on her own and got an application to be a volunteer there.

Maria also participated in all the other projects we did. Her favorite was adopting a grandparent, and said "it was awesome" in response to her first experience at Pine Apartments. She told her mom about her adopted grandparent and the letter she wrote to soldiers. She wrote, "We are all happy and thankful you are fighting for us. Good bye and God Bless." Overall, Maria thinks service projects are good and have "motivated me to talk to people." She did not think she helped much, but was happy that she cared for others.

Conclusions and Implications

Although the study was limited in that only five students with disabilities were studied, data was only collected from one semester, and we did not have time to implement all the projects the students designed within the

semester, there were some clear conclusions from this study. As a result of the service-learning projects, my students displayed increased motivation, showed they cared for each other, were eager to help, made connections of what they were learning in school to the real world, and improved their social skills and self-confidence. The projects benefitted everyone involved, including all the students as they realized that they have something to give.

The results of these service-learning projects were consistent with those found in the literature. Students were able to experience the excitement of helping others, which

increased motivation and encouraged them to become more involved in their own education (Scott, 2006). While the service-learning projects positively affected the students in special education, they had a great impact on the students in regular education as well. The students cared about each other and were motivated by valu-

able work which resulted in increased desire to learn (Lewis et al., 1996). Feedback is a major source of intrinsic motivation, and the students received a lot of positive feedback from teachers, students, and people in the community (Jensen, 1998). The classroom teacher noted that the students had a great attitude and learned a lot from participating in the projects and making them as productive and beneficial for as many people as possible.

The students were very excited and intrinsically motivated to complete the projects and frequently asked when they could meet in committees again or visit their adopted grandparent.

Jeff, his teachers, and parents agree that his attitude toward school-work has changed after doing the projects. "It has changed my life. I help more and do more community work."

“Service-learning motivates students by taking them beyond the classroom to address community problems that they care about” (Richardson, 2006, p. 38). Like Abernathy and Obenchain (2001) found, since the students met in committees and were responsible for planning, organizing, and implementing the projects as the teachers facilitated and guided, their active student participation led to student ownership of the projects. The mix of students in regular education and special education on the committees allowed them to learn from each other and work together as one united committee working toward a common goal. The students in special education were given the chance to take leadership roles they otherwise may not have.

Students learned a great deal about social skills, history, writing, and leadership. The projects reinforced classroom instruction, and students used their writing, reading, problem solving, organization, communication, and leadership skills throughout the projects. The classroom teacher felt the students’ social abilities were strengthened because they had to interact with different people in a variety of situations and took responsibility in leadership roles. Students’ writing improved as they felt a purpose for writing, so they were eager to write and share their writing. One student commented, “That’s cool that we have a connection over there (in Iraq).” They had a deeper understanding of history, the Great Depression, and World War II as they made real-life connections through their adopted grandparents. An adopted grandparent stated, “You could tell they’re really interested, if you’re interested, you’re learning.” Students saw how the skills they learn in school are useful in the real world and began to practice those academic skills in their home lives as well (Lewis et al., 1996).

Students were eager to help. On the initial survey, students filled in an average of nine projects they wanted to complete. When asked to volunteer, students didn’t care what the project was; they wanted to help with it. Coulter (2004) stated, “Service-learning provides the vehicle through which students can increase their empathy for others” (p. 20). Discussing the canned food drive, one regular education student commented, “It makes us feel better if we know we’re helping more people. There are more people in the community than just here at school.”

The students’ excitement for the projects was greater than I originally anticipated. They wanted to do many different projects on a larger scale than at the school level in a short amount of time. The food drive committee wanted to collect food at a local grocery store and the bake sale committee wanted to have the sale at a junior high athletic event. Time became a major concern for both the classroom teacher and I, as all the projects and ideas were wonderful, but when could we find the time to plan, organize, and effectively implement them all and not take away from any of their academic learning time? If I were to do the project again, I would focus on three or less projects so it would be easier to manage. While service-learning projects may be time consuming, students are learning through the process and the educational value is well worth it.

Service-learning projects provide the link between school and the community that makes the projects meaningful and help the students see beyond themselves. Everyone benefited from the projects, including all the students, teachers, community, soldiers in Iraq, and adopted grandparents. As in Parker’s study (2006), the students enhanced the social lives of their adopted grandparents, and the grandparents helped the students gain

a deeper understanding of history. Service-learning projects bolstered my students' self-confidence, increased their motivation, helped them realize that they each have something to give, and that they can make a difference. Students made connections to the real world as one student wrote to my husband, "The country would not be as strong without your hands helping to hold the weight of it."

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