Front and Center: Contradicting Isolation by Supporting Leadership and Service by Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

When students with disabilities are isolated socially and physically, their self-confidence and engagement may be low. Encouraging leadership and service in students who are often overlooked for these roles enhances peer relations, engagement, and self-confidence. Principles and strategies for fostering leadership and service are described.

Keywords

service learning, leadership, inclusion, friendship, engagement, self-confidence

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Kyle, a kindergartner who cried constantly at the thought of being alone or separated from the teaching assistant, Mrs. R.,"merely existed" in his general education class, neither speaking nor playing with other children. He spent much of the day in his own world pretending to be a playful monster which resulted in his classmates not playing with him because they were afraid or amused but put off. He said he didn't know why he did these things.

Davy, a second grader with a hearing impairment, loved animals and art.
He didn't speak well and got upset when he didn't understand others. While his special education teacher worked with him to learn sign language and he was able to communicate in sign with his special education peers, he was quiet and socially isolated in his inclusive math class. He performed better in art because people spoke louder over the general noise level, but he still did not interact much.

Natalie, a third grader who constantly daydreamed, played with objects at her desk, and had an overall lack of attention during classroom learning times. Although her behaviors weren't disruptive to other students' learning, her teachers were concerned that she wasn't completing her work because of these off task behaviors. Even though Natalie sometimes participated in group learning activities, she often withdrew from her peers in learning and social interactions.

Students with disabilities like Kyle, Davy, and Natalie, may have challenges making friends due to a variety of causes (Salend, 2008). Some show their frustration with tasks or situations with behaviors that put off their classmates. Others lack confidence and fear rejection and so they withdraw. Difficulty making friends and social isolation may compound academic challenges faced by students with disabilities such as Kyle, Davy, and Natalie. Teachers supporting these students may find student responses challenging and may form incorrect first impressions about what is going on. To avoid these pitfalls, this article proposes ways for teachers to step back and see their students, particularly those with disabilities, in a larger context than the immediate problems they perceive, and also elaborates on practices that combat student isolation and its negative consequences. In order to think freshly about these students, it can be useful to first step back and see the big picture of living with a disability.

The Big Picture

A useful aid in stepping back to see the "big picture" is to refer to some recently proposed guidelines that have been suggested to frame discussions of effective practice (Smith et al., 2009). These guidelines include:

- Educators must assure that students with disabilities or who are perceived to have disabilities are fully participating citizens of the educational community.
- Steps must be taken to contradict exclusive and marginalizing cultural norms so that disability is recognized as another interesting way to be alive. As everyone needs some kind of support, and most supports for people with disabilities are useful to many people, these should be made available to all; unique supports should be viewed as a norm.
- Labeling should be replaced with useful knowledge about the individual and what supports learning.

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Promoting full citizenship and overcoming the negative influences of labels has generated literature on the importance of friendships. Fostering friendships (see Figure 1) has been widely proposed (Salend, 2008) to boost self esteem and full participation.

Figure 1: What does the literature say about friendships and disability?

Literature on friendships point out that childhood social anxiety consistently has been linked with low levels of peer-acceptance. Friendships are a protective factor against some mental health problems and that ability to relate/communicate and "social competence" are important to maintaining friendships (Chadsey & Gun, 2005; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008).

One study found that "above all, specific personality factors emerged as being particularly influential and these may suggest that, rather than particular universal qualities, it may be a person's more tangible, individual preferences [such as interests and skills] that are most important in determining friendships (Brackenridge & McKenzie, 2005, p. 17).

Strategies for fostering friendships include pairing students with multiple classmates so they can get to know each other and including them in after-school clubs (Chadsey & Gun, 2005), building reciprocal inclusive classroom communities (Salend, 2008; Sapon-Shevin, 1999; Sapon-Shevin, 2008), and positive behavioral supports and person centered planning (Brackenridge & McKenzie, 2005,Jackson & Panyan, 2002), and social intervention (Frostad, 2007;Koegel, 2007).

Leadership and Service

Although many strategies have been found to enhance peer relationships, little attention has been paid to leadership and service opportunities that may be available to isolated students and those with limited social skills. One way to help students build social skills and friendships is found in the core social concepts related to service learning.

Service learning participants generally become involved with an agency or organization to support the goals of the entity and foster growth in the student. A database search for "service learning" reveals it is usually employed at the post secondary level in the helping professions and business. The few studies on service learning and students with disabilities in elementary, intermediate and high schools yield the same positive benefits. Students learn skills and apply knowledge while addressing a community need (Scott, 2006). Service learning, less often considered for students with disabilities, has also been found to benefit those participating. Benefits include the opportunity for students, who are often service recipients, to give rather than receive, engage in meaningful experiences, and improve critical thinking (Olnes 2008). Other benefits are increased self esteem, motivation, and independence as students come to realize the power of their contribution to society (Olnes 2008; Scott, 2006).

Service learning, for example, has recently been proposed as a class project for students with disabilities to promote self-efficacy, overcome learned helplessness, and improve motivation and social and academic skills (Scott, 2006). Another successful class service learning project validated findings from other service learning research, including increased motivation and increased involvement in their own education (Olnes 2008). Yet such class-wide projects in special education or general education classrooms run into considerable roadblocks ranging from curriculum and standardized test preparation (Wade, 2007) to the bureaucracy involved in arranging activities outside the

school building. A grant-funded service learning project in an alternative discipline school (Nelson & Eckstein, 2008) yielded interesting results after successful completion of service projects:

> "the teachers came to adopt a service learning encouraging philosophy.... allowing students to take more responsibility for learning in everyday lesson plans...[and] giving students more classroom opportunities to link service (even service in the classroom) to academics. Many teachers use students for tutoring other students, leading discussions, and making suggestions about their own learning" (p. 233).

Enhancing motivation, skills training (including social skills), and engagement in service are activities that include developing relationships with others, doing with and for others, and gaining in leadership opportunities and skills. These activities can contradict the isolation of students with disabilities. Even where service learning programs that create social contexts exist, many isolated students with disabilities are often excluded due to lack of prerequisite social skills. Thus, rather than focusing on service learning programs for students with disabilities which are rare in both general and special education outside of peer tutoring arrangements, this article focuses on an "encouraging service learning philosophy," as mentioned above, creating valued roles for students through activities that may be considered as service and/or leadership.

Examples are drawn from the reflections of 30 teachers in a graduate special education class who were asked to get to know a student with a disability and to support them in service or leadership. Although the examples cited are drawn from inclusive settings, those in more restricted settings engaged in the same "encouraging service learning philosophy." Because age posed no limitations, the examples cited range from kindergarten to high school with very few age distinctions.

Teachers thinking about supporting leadership and service broaden the concept of getting to know the whole person. To do this they understand the complexity of student lives and how they communicate needs, desires, and engagement; look beyond the label, put aside their first impressions and assumptions, and support full citizenship; they integrate the ideas behind the social construction of disability and the realities of the impairments. Getting to know their students in this social context as well as the classroom context contributes to effective and ethical practices (see Smith et. al, 2009) which can be used in any classroom.

Teachers with limited resources of time, money, and personnel do not need to wait for someone to create a program for their students to have meaningful social interactions in their learning communities; meaningful social interactions leading to valued roles have resulted when teachers have focused on students who are often overlooked for such leadership and service roles by their other teachers.

Following are five principles with strategies to support students in service or leadership roles; the strategies include insights and approaches that teachers have used to empower students with special needs and improve their peer relationships. The following strategies and principles can be used by adults (classroom teachers, related service professionals, interns, and volunteers) to support student leadership and involvement, even with limited resources and modern day performance pressures.

Principle 1: Focus on quality of life

Supporting service or leadership in isolated children requires first thinking about the quality of their life. When we think about our quality of life, our minds turn to things like meaningful work with peers we respect and hopefully like, engaging leisure, good friends, and lots of interesting choices. We hope the same for our children and students. Sometimes, educators fail to apply these same standards to their students with disabilities if they only focus on what is wrong. You can broaden your thinking about the student with some questions. Ask yourself, "What is life like for the student? How would you feel in his or her place? Who is on your side (as if you were the student) and how could you tell? Who is in your circle of friends? Is school interesting?" Educators need to step back and look at quality of life issues with inarticulate students who struggle with speaking and those like Kyle who cannot explain their actions. Kyle's teaching assistant [TA] noticed this:

> When I first started working with Kyle, my focus was to try and fix him and make how he was feeling go away. I thought if I could just make him stop crying he would be better. I now realize that I was wrong in doing this. Instead of focusing on making his behavior go away I should have started by focusing on his classroom acceptance. I feel I looked at him as more of a project I could fix. I realized what he really needed was to be treated as a human being first.

Kyle was isolated by his behavior but didn't know what to do. He was afraid to go to the bathroom alone, so his teacher assistant found him a bathroom buddy and they became friends. Kyle was surprised to learn from his new friend that other students thought he was weird for acting like a monster all the time. He confided in the TA that he was upset but could not give up pretending. She got him to agree to pretend only until lunch. By having thoughts of quality of life issues, she asked him more questions to get to know him better. This led to ideas about his potential leadership. She learned he was passionate about soccer and knew all the rules and positions. She arranged to take the class out for 45 minutes each afternoon to learn soccer. Kyle taught the rules and was the resident expert. The students were impressed that he knew so much and asked to be on his team. He was now a part of the classroom community and interacting with friends.

Principle 2: Expand communication strategies and venues as needed

Supporting service or leadership of students who have limited or unusual communication skills requires looking at how they communicate best and expanding those opportunities. We all have places and situations where we communicate better and poorly. In a foreign country we may need a translator, seek out people who speak like us, and find ways to communicate through sign, text, and pictures to buy things, find the toilet, or make friends. Likewise, students can communicate well in some places but not with others. The reasons may range from language issues to social anxiety.

In the case of Davy, his behavior issues and subsequent isolation stemmed from his insecurities and difficulties in communication. His disability was exacerbated by environments where sign language was not used, as the teacher noticed in in art class:

> It is important to learn the specific needs of the students and teach those needs to the class around the student. Here it allowed the students to under-

stand that Davy was not just moving his hands in funny ways but communicating or trying to communicate. Now they can communicate with him.

Davy's success in the special education class where they learned sign language did not carry over into inclusive math and art. Davy was very interested in art and his art teacher took an interest in supporting him. She learned some commonly used signs and taught them to the math class where the teacher then also used them, and Davy began to communicate with his classmates.

Principle 3: Seize opportunities for student leadership

Teachers who get into the habit of looking for leadership opportunities in places they considered unlikely open new experiences for all in their classrooms. As adults, we may have experiences when we do not see ourselves as leaders. We are surprised and pleased when our strengths are recognized, our talents tapped, and opportunities for growth occur. The more you get to know a student the more you can learn about possibilities for leadership. When Kyle was becoming less isolated and more comfortable, the teacher learned about his interest in soccer. For Davy, the new peer interest in him was confusing; the new communication between Davy and his peers was only a first step. Davy's art teacher noticed this:

> He shared with me that he, "didn't understand why they talk to him now and want to be his friends. Davy sharing this feeling allowed me to see that he needed to do something that gave him confidence and so he can be proud of his accomplishment. Davy needed to see that it's not just that the

class can communicate with him but that they see him as equal and a peer.

Davy's art teacher noticed he was fascinated with a book on cave paintings and used this interest to put him in a leadership position. First, Davy taught her the signs for the animals. She enlisted him in co-teaching a unit on cave paintings. He co-led the discussion and taught the signs for the animals. The students thought he was "cool" to know all about the cave paintings. The class project was to make cave paintings on paper lining the school hallway. His teacher noted how Davy led the demonstration and showed them the correct and incorrect way to make the paintings on the walls:

> Throughout the time they worked I listened to the class's conversations. They were very positive about the lesson and thought it was cool that Davy was able to be "smarter then the teacher." Just by observing Davy, I could tell that he was happy with his accomplishment. From that day I have noticed the students in my art class all wanted Davy to sit at their table and share his art work with them. ….He no longer says" I can't do it" but says "Let me try". I respect his transformation and unique story behind his journey to being a child who was disabled to a child with a special gift and, as the students say, "cool language."

Principle 4: Capitalize on strengths and interests

Opportunities for service and leadership grow from strengths and interests. We all have unique strengths and interests. Sometimes we are quiet and wait for people to draw us out; other times we may want to talk about them all the time. When we have interests in common with others, we become more

engaged in each other and in what we are doing.

Getting to know your students' strengths and interests yields valuable tips to motivating and supporting them. They may be withdrawn and insecure in your class where many challenges may interact with their disability. Outside of class they may be athletic or experts in sports, dinosaurs, their family culture, or a language. They may know (or want to learn) a game the other students don't know and teach it to them. Kyle's TA noticed this:

> I learned that it is extremely important to get to know each one of your students on an individual basis. By asking him about his interests, likes, and dislikes, I was able to take a personal glimpse into his life. It is important to establish this type of relationship with each one of your students before you can effectively teach him or her inside of your classroom. The aspects of a child's life, like their health, home, friends, likes, dislikes... are all important factors in considering how you are going to motivate that child to learn.

Some students display their interests much of the time and teachers are often tempted to distract them or even silence them about their interest. Grandin (1995) reminds us to capitalize on the obsessions of people with autism. For example, an obsession with food can lead to teaching a recipe to classmates or a compelling interest in a favorite baseball team can lead to working on projects with peer sports enthusiasts.

Principle 5: The disability may not be the problem

When a student's disability is the main focus of our attention, we often overlook important things about the student like their need for valued roles and their potential for service or leadership. We all have challenges and things we are not good at. Some of us struggle with numbers, sports, map reading, cooking, singing, or drawing more than some of our peers. These weaknesses do not define our lives and neither should disability. Therefore, disability should not be viewed as a problem.

Many of the problems students with disabilities experience are rooted in environmental factors, response to their impairment by others, and the student's reactions to negative responses that lead to negative self talk. For example, although Natalie had a learning disability, her expressed fear of making mistakes and standing out (e.g., being laughed at) was what interfered with her learning and increased her isolation. Her teacher noticed:

> Natalie has taught me about the struggles young people go through on a daily basis with their desire to be accepted and fit in with their peers. Her learning disability has become a burden on her social life [regarding her fear of mistakes] and as a result she is suffering academically by being so withdrawn and afraid.

While looking into Natalie's quality of life, her music teacher noticed she was a different person with the track team, outgoing and confident. In order to boost her academic skills and self esteem and expand the venues of confidence, she asked Natalie if she would lead a team of students to organize the music library, sorting music by category and season and labeling the boxes. Natalie did well in organizing her small group and learned to be careful with her music labels. Her other teachers noticed that her work became better and more legible. To promote Natalie's leadership, she then asked Natalie to lead warm-

ups before the music class. Natalie was hesitant at first but lead with some others beside her, then confidently alone for the rest of the year. The increase in self-confidence was evident to her music teacher in her relaxed way of leading warm-ups and her increased participation in music and other classes:

> Natalie has made me realize that feeling comfortable in social surroundings plays an important part in any student's academic success. By giving her an environment that allowed her to come out of her "shell," she was able to feel comfortable asking questions, and could focus on other things besides what those around her might think about what she says and does.

Putting it All Together: Engagement, Confidence, Opportunity

These principles are interrelated. The principles, applied together, build student confidence and engagement through opportunities to lead or serve.

Engagement

Engagement can refer to student involvement with activities and with other students. Sometimes engaged students are socially isolated. For example, Davy was interested in school but did not interact freely with peers until he began his teaching project. Natalie became engaged as team leader in sorting out the music and learned risk taking in a different venue.

Confidence

Engagement builds confidence. Confidence can expand to more activities, risk taking, and enhanced relationships. Natalie's developing confidence during her music sorting project resulted in improved academic performance. She also co-led the music

warm-up exercises until she had enough confidence to lead on her own.

Opportunity

Confidence and engagement may be hard to foster if the student fails to open the door when opportunity knocks. Educators must keep an eye out for opportunities and help students take advantage of them. Keeping an eye out for opportunities to support leadership can open opportunities for both you and your students. If the art teacher had not noticed how Davy could use his interest in cave painting to advance his sense of belonging, not only would Davy have missed the opportunity, but the teacher also would have missed the richness of the added dimension of sign language in her art lesson. Another teacher summed up what she learned about seizing opportunity to foster leadership. The math teacher noticed a struggling student with a natural aptitude for algebra and discovered he was also gifted in explaining things to his peers. He ended up helping teach in the after school math program and improving in his other classes:

> I have since tried to apply what I have learned about student confidence, on a smaller scale, in all of my classes. I have been seeking out opportunities for students who usually are not so successful to shine. I have been watching more closely for the glimmer of understanding or natural aptitude. I have had several opportunities to let students be the smart one or have the spotlight. He [my student] taught me how important it is to actively look for ways to let a student look good in front of his/her peers. I also learned that letting a student work up to his/her potential can make my

life easier. I certainly appreciated having the help in class and after school.

Many of the students supported required some scaffolding. Some were getting extra attention on social or academic skills and the teachers involved simply shifted the frame of reference of their help. Their teachers showed that once you develop the habit of looking for opportunities, it becomes natural to support the students' growth toward service and leadership in small but significant ways. The chart below shows some of the ways teachers have supported leadership and service. Each example is taken from a successful classroom experience and can, of course apply to any student.

For many of these students their leadership and service led to improved relationships and academic performance or met other IEP goals. For others, it was an important first step. Isolation is an ongoing issue for people with disabilities. Contradicting it in schools requires alert adults to be open and support students to take advantage of and create opportunities, and in the process teach self-determination skills. For the teacher, a certain amount of ambiguity tolerance is necessary. Concerned teachers may first look for something to fix in the student. It helps to remember the outcome would be unknown and if it didn't work the way they imagined it should, they can evaluate the experience for them-

selves and their students and try something new. Use the "fix it impulse" as a signal to dig deeper. In order to support leadership, one needs an understanding of the complexity of the student's life, and to follow the student's lead which means spending time with the student before co-creating a plan with the student. When teachers generate the idea without student input, students may refuse it or come up with a better plan. Teachers can think about "following the student" in terms of how that student can lead you in how to support him or her in leadership and growth.

Student leadership projects may need scaffolding as in a child who led three consecutive science experiments, the first one as a teacher assistant, and the following one with the teacher as assistant, and the third time led by the student and a friend with the teacher as back-up.

You can take advantage of limited resources by enlisting other students. If a student could teach part of a lesson, he or she can rehearse with another adult or another student and then co-lead the class for that period. A strong student could coach a weaker student to lead a review session. Adult volunteers who come to tutor can be enlisted to use their time with students to support service and leadership. If the tutor is mandated to teach academics, the new skill or material can become something their tutee can teach others.

Figure 2: Leadership Examples

Classroom Leadership	
Activity	Examples
Teaching or co-teaching a lesson or game to peers	• Students with social skill difficulties can learn turn-taking while learning a board game and teaching it to peers. Subsequent play is often more successful. • Students, with adult support, can develop and rehearse a skit about turn taking and entering a conversation without interrupting and perform it to the class. • Withdrawn students can learn to work with a peer (who often becomes a new friend) to demonstrate science experiments to the class. The increase in self confidence often carries over into other class activities. • Teachers can capitalize on a student's love of board or video games to increase his participation and engagement in a subject he does not like.
Becoming class expert	• A student isolated due to mobility challenges can became the class "GO TO" computer guru or other kind of expert. • Struggling readers and writers who are sports fans can become, with adult encouragement, the sports editor and writer of the lead article of the class newspaper. • Students with computer expertise can improve social skills and gain friends as the class computer consultant.
Teaching a skill	• Students learning anger management can teach classmates how to calm down by counting to 20 in American Sign Language or teach some other stress reduction activity.
Class and school jobs (Delegate jobs teachers often do)	• Students with aversion to change might write the daily schedule and job rotations on the board each day and improve their day. • Students with multiple disabilities might use a communication device and can deliver mail or supplies, for example to take orders from each teacher for the art cart and to deliver the supplies later in the week. • Shy students can learn about a key aspect of a lesson and help teach that lesson, thus gaining social confidence.
After-school Leadership	
Activity	Examples
Forming clubs	• Shy students with academic and attention challenges can be supported to begin an after-school club (e.g., Legos, action figures, mystery books), causing them to reach out to peers.
Joining activities-clubs and sports	• Students with autism and few peer interactions might have skills and interests (e.g., cartooning, sports) and get jobs (and new friends) on their school papers. • Gifted athletes who struggle with academics or cover their problems with disruptive classroom behavior may be invited to take leadership in their team and be motivated to repair relationships (and academic standing) with teachers.

| In-School Free Time Leadership (lunch, recess, choice time) ||
Activity	Examples
Book club Sports activities	• Students can begin a lunchtime book club and make new friends. • Students might teach a new game to classmates during recess (e.g., soccer, cooperative games) and make new friends.
Reading to younger students	• Student with behavioral or reading challenges can practice reading a book and then read it to the kindergarten with a follow up discussion, thus gaining skills and confidence.
Recycling projects	• Students with cognitive disabilities can be in charge of a centrally located recycling station in the school and significantly increase peer interactions.
Saving the world projects	• Struggling readers might be interested in reading projects that save acres of rainforest or help some other environmental issue.
Tutoring in academic assistance classes	• Students doing poorly in most classes may shine in one subject and be enlisted in helping other students in class and tutoring after school.

Conclusion

Teachers who support service and leadership do not view labels and severity of disability as predictors of quality of school life for students. Nor do they see limitations on student potential for meaningful experiences in community. They take actions to enhance the quality of the school experience for all their students by seeing their students as complex human beings with sometimes unusual means of communicating their likes and dislikes and wants and challenges (Smith, 2000). They look beyond the labels to understand the quality of the students' lives and promote their full participation. Unlike teachers attempting to merely "fix" students, they treat students as full citizens in school. They understand that students need more than help: they need to help others too. Students crave the meaningful and reciprocal relationships that leadership and service inspire. Finding opportunities for students like Kyle, Davy, and Natalie to lead and serve can be an effective way for both teachers and students to broaden their perspectives and enrich their classrooms.

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