In the 2004–2005 school year, Beth was a sophomore at Madison High School. She enjoyed drawing, reading, and spending time with her friends. She was classified as having moderate cognitive disabilities, and spent most of her school day with her primary special education teacher, Mrs. Sullivan. Beth spent about 60% of her school day in Mrs. Sullivan’s room, and the remainder of the day in general education classes. She enjoyed her general education American history class, for example, with the popular teacher Mr. Whittaker. He provided accommodations such as letting her listen to taped transcriptions of the textbook, and modified her assignments. Beth’s parents, her teachers, and Beth agreed that her educational placement was a good one, and that she was working in appropriate classrooms that were the least restrictive settings for her abilities and needs.

That year, when Beth turned 16, the team in charge of her individualized education program (IEP) began developing her individualized transition plan, as required by the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). Mrs. Sullivan, as part of that team, had received excellent supports and training from her district regarding the transition planning and the transition requirements of IDEA. For example, her district diligently promotes interagency connections with local agencies that serve individuals with disabilities, a practice that research has shown to be effective in promoting the transition outcomes of students with disabilities (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000). In support of this priority, her district arranges and hosts monthly meetings in which the representatives of social service and human services agencies and nonprofit organizations meet to discuss the transition plans of individual students. These meetings have produced tangible benefits for the students, the school, and the district. Through these monthly meetings, a greater degree of attention and scrutiny is given to each student’s transition plan. Agency and nonprofit representatives have opportunities to solve problems and brainstorm with educators, often suggesting possibilities and approaches that the school district personnel, working without this input, might not have envisioned.

Another research-based practice Mrs. Sullivan knew to be effective is providing real-world work experience to students while they are in school (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997). Accordingly, Mrs. Sullivan worked with local business people and agencies to arrange a work experience for Beth. In her last 2 years of high school, Beth worked for 3 hours a day at a local shop that manufactures and sells candles and holiday decorations.

Beth now lives in an apartment through independent living services with a roommate, and she is attending classes in culinary arts through a local nonprofit organization. She is working full time at a restaurant in the evenings, and dreams of becoming a chef there. She says that she likes her job and her apartment, and the challenge of going to school and working. In Beth’s case, we see that educators using research-based practices can significantly assist students with moderate and severe disabilities to successfully transition to the adult world.
Service Works!

Promoting Transition Success for Students With Disabilities Through Participation in Service Learning

Michael P. O’Connor

Students With Mild Disabilities

For students with mild disabilities such as learning disabilities (LD), however, transitions to adult life are rarely reflective of research and best practices. Students with LD in most cases must negotiate their transition to adult life with little or no supports except the informal supports provided by family and friends. The web of agency services and research-based practice that characterizes effective transition policy for students with more significant disabilities is simply not in place for students with LD (Dowdy, 1996). Indeed, for all students with disabilities, it has been noted that the transition requirements of the IEP are too often given only cursory attention, and a large majority of the states have been found in noncompliance with the transition requirements of IDEA (Greene & Kohler, 2004). This unfortunate situation persists despite the fact that transition goals are considered a central tenet of our national special education policy (Turnbull, Stowe, & Huerta, 2006).

Students with LD are most often educated in the general education classroom (Rosenberg, Westling, & McLeskey, 2008), where it seems clear that a significant lack of attention to the concept of transition also exists. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), for example, does not specifically address students’ postschool success or transition outcomes. One challenge before researchers, then, is that of providing research-based transition activities for students with mild disabilities within the general education classroom. Are there effective ways, for example, for students in general education classrooms to engage in real-world work experience and interact with working professional adults? In this article, service learning is suggested as a community-based educational practice which, according to the research, can promote students’ success in both academic and transition-related goals.

What Is Service Learning?

Proponents of service learning generally embrace John Dewey’s view that learning is tied inextricably to experience, and that students will learn more when they see clear connections between academic subjects and the real world (Dewey, 1916; Kwak, Shen, & Kavanaugh, 2002). Service learning is broadly defined as the explicit linkage of academic subject matter to community-based and student-directed service projects (National Youth Leadership Council, 2004). This article will offer examples of well-designed service-learning projects incorporating rigorous academic learning while engaging students in community improvement (for types of service-learning projects, see box “Common Types of Service-Learning Projects”).

In one example, sixth-grade students in San Francisco helped to create a historical mural of the Mission District based on the period from 1969 to 2001. For this project, the students wrote a budget, helped develop grant proposals, learned interview techniques from reporters with the San Francisco Chronicle, interviewed community members, researched written histories and biographies, wrote letters to the community, used math to create graphs for scaling up their drawings to mural size, and volunteered their summer vacation time to finish the project. The completed mural now stands on Valencia Street, depicting the lives of community activists, educators, artists, a policeman, and a fireman, all of whom influenced current history in the Mission District (National Commission on Service-Learning, 2002).

The Desert to Garden Project was part of Arizona’s K–12 Learn and Serve America program. The project involved 13 high school dropouts from the Pascua Yaqui Indian Tribe. These students researched and created a native garden on the reservation, wrote an article for the local newspaper, presented a story-telling session and garden tour for local Head Start students, produced a trilingual coloring and activity book, and organized an Open Garden
day for the community. All 13 students completed the goals of the project, participated in career development activities, and improved in standardized tests of basic skills. Three students returned to school, and others made progress toward earning a GED (Muscott, 2000).

Students in Jamesville, North Carolina, cleaned up the Roanoke River by hauling trash out of the river, produced a video on pollution, started a hauling trash out of the river, producing a video on pollution, started a recycling program, analyzed water from the river in cooperation with the Fish and Wildlife Service, and are credited with developing a new way to kill alligator weed, a noxious species clogging the river (Riley & Wofford, 2000). One interesting facet of this project is the way in which the students interacted with the wildlife service professionals in an essentially collaborative relationship.

In one final example, fourth-grade students in Hudson, Massachusetts, conducted a year-long study of wetlands areas near the school, collecting water samples and data related to plant variety in the area, and cleaning up the wetlands area (Berman, 1999). This project was tied to the students’ classroom study of the ecology of wetlands areas and the need to protect and preserve these areas. The fourth-grade students who participated in the wetlands project—a group characterized by relatively low socioeconomic status—scored in the top 20% of all fourth-grade students in Massachusetts’ high-stakes test, garnering their school much appreciated positive attention in the local media. The superintendent of this district is an outspoken advocate of academically rigorous service-learning, student-inquiry, hands-on methodology, and real-world applications of academic subjects. (For more information on creating a service-learning project, see box, “How to Begin a Service-Learning Project”).

Two research summaries of service-learning studies demonstrated student gains from participation in service learning in four primary areas: (a) personal and social development, (b) academic achievement, (c) citizenship, and (d) career awareness (Billig, 2000b; Conrad & Hedin, 1991). Research also supports the contention that students engaged in service-learning projects often gain specific information related to their communities and possible occupations, gain opportunities to meet and interact with working professionals, and acquire career aspirations and information pertinent to their career goals (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2002).

Service-learning activities often provide opportunities for students to meet specific IEP goals in academics, social learning, or personal growth. The interactive, highly social nature of organized service-learning activities provides real-life structured situations in which positive social interactions, for example, can be practiced and rewarded (see box, “Inclusion and Multiculturalism in Service Learning”). Teachers often find that service-learning projects provide a learning environment conducive for addressing IEP goals in student self-determination, as student autonomy and decision-making power is strongly encouraged in service-learning practice. Furthermore, students in these projects may find ample opportunities to address important transition-related IEP goals related to occupational awareness, effective personal interaction, and the development of potential career goals.

Bridging Initiatives in General and Special Education

The vast majority of the literature and research on service learning concerns projects originating in general education classrooms. This article discusses service learning as a pedagogical method with significant potential to enhance the success of all students, with and without disabilities, in general education classrooms. In general, service learning can enhance the success of students in inclusive settings by providing hands-on experiences connected with learning, and providing multiple ways of learning and analyzing academic concepts.

As Seitsinger (2005) has noted, researchers’ current focus on standards-based instruction for all students (e.g., accountability) has led educators to seek “instructional strategies for fostering student proficiency in higher order...
thinking and subject-matter integration” (p. 19). Content-specific objectives and learning standards should be explicitly linked to service-learning projects, reinforcing standards-based instruction in schools (Waterman, 1997). Service learning, when explicitly aligned with content-specific objectives, has a strong potential to help students practice higher order thinking and better understand academic concepts. In general, well-designed service-learning activities, when incorporated into the general education classroom, provide an effective way of enhancing access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities by providing opportunities for students to connect knowledge to the real world, see the relevance of academic learning, and connect learning to personal and emotional motivators in their lives.

In this way, service learning can act as a bridge between the parallel initiatives seen in special education (e.g., inclusion, and access to the general curriculum), and general education (e.g., increased rigor and standards-based instruction). A good example of this principle can be seen in the high school reform movement. Largely spearheaded by the National Governor’s Association, as well as philanthropic organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the high school reform movement has focused nationwide attention on the problems of low academic achievement and graduation rates in high schools. The organizations previously noted, as well as other central stakeholders in the high school reform movement, have adopted the conceptual framework provided by the “Three Rs: Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships” (National Conference of State Legislators, 2008). The introduction of high-quality service-learning activities in general education settings has a significant potential to enhance and support this emphasis on rigor, relevance, and relationships.

Increased academic rigor is a central tenet of high school reform policy (Olson, 2006), as clearly seen in the recent national trend mandating college-preparatory curriculum for all students. Most states have now adopted this requirement for high school students, reversing a long history of discriminatory educational tracking in U.S. schools (Ravitch, 2000). This increased rigor presents all high school students, including those with mild disabilities, with increasingly difficult academic material.

Research has demonstrated that the use of service learning can lead to increased engagement in school, and statistically higher standardized and content-specific test scores; furthermore, these benefits are maximized when service-learning activities are explicitly linked to standards and curriculum content (Billig, 2000a). The experiential and hands-on nature of service learning helps students to better understand and process academic content. In this way, service learning can be seen as providing a supportive role in helping students handle the increasing rigor of academic work in high school by providing multiple ways of experiencing, processing, and understanding difficult academic concepts. Students with mild disabilities, it should be noted, participate in the

How to Begin a Service-Learning Project

1. **Preparation:** Hold brainstorming sessions with students, asking them to identify and discuss the following: (a) community problems that might be addressed in a project, (b) possible solutions, (c) possible resources, (d) learning objectives and standards that will be addressed in the project, and (e) the goal of the selected project.

2. **Planning:** (a) have students organize the project—this gives them practice in planning, collaboration, and personal responsibility; (b) define roles and responsibilities of students within the project; (c) define how learning objectives and standards will be addressed in the project; (d) identify community and school partners needed for the success of the project; (e) form a plan of action and set a timeline; and (f) anticipate likely problems and form strategies for controlling or solving them.

3. **Carry out project:** (a) provide structured opportunities for students to document the project, give feedback, and discuss possible problems and solutions; (b) provide structured opportunities to discuss the meaning of the project in class; and (c) provide feedback to students on their work and collaborative skills.

4. **Reflection:** Provide students with structured opportunities to reflect on the significance of the project after it is completed. Students analyze its significance to the community, its academic significance, their own personal roles, and their cognitive and emotional reactions to the experience. They record and express these reflections in some way, such as a written paper or presentation to the class. Space does not permit a comprehensive discussion of the critically important Reflection phase here, but a more in-depth view can be found at http://www.goodcharacter.com/SERVICE/primer-5.html.

For a highly comprehensive resource for planning and directing service-learning projects, *Learning In Deed*, which is a report from the National Commission on Service-Learning, can be accessed at http://www.wkkf.org/pubs/PhilVol/Pub3679.pdf

*Teachers often find that service-learning projects provide a learning environment conducive for addressing IEP goals in student self-determination, as student autonomy and decision-making power is strongly encouraged in service-learning practice.*
academic learning tasks as their peers who do not have disabilities in completing cooperative service-learning projects.

Service learning is offered as an important example of an educational connection between these worlds, providing students opportunities to make safe, structured forays into the real world of work and adult responsibility in community-based, fully inclusive problem-solving roles.

The principle of “relevance” is clearly reflected in service-learning practice. Service-learning is largely based on the concept of relevance, as seen in the foundational work of John Dewey (1916), who believed that students learn best when learning activities are explicitly connected to the real world. Service-learning projects are, by definition, highly relevant to real life, in that these projects begin with students identifying and agreeing on some pressing social problem existing in the real world. Through the design and completion of these projects, students gain firsthand experience in work environments, learn specific knowledge about various jobs, learn about the educational requirements for different occupations, meet and interact with adult professionals in various occupations, and through these activities clearly see the connections between academic knowledge and success in the real world.

Finally, the concept of promoting “relationships” as a component of increasing student achievement is based on research that indicates students demonstrate higher achievement in school when they perceive that they have a personal relationship with an adult in the school (National Conference of State Legislators, 2008). The potential for creating and nurturing these positive teacher–student relationships, as well as positive relationships with other supportive adults in the community, has been well-documented in service-learning literature (Henness, 2001; Morgan & Streb, 1999; Muscott, 2000; O’Connor, 2008). Researchers in the field of socioemotional studies have promoted service learning as an effective strategy for development of core socioemotional competencies, including the development of relationship-building skills, noting that service learning provides opportunities for students to practice interpersonal skills and knowledge (Elias, 2003).

Summary

It is clear our nation will need an effective, balanced, and truly inclusive public educational system in the 21st century, one that promotes knowledge of both the academic world and the world of work. Service learning is offered as an important example of an educational connection between these worlds, providing students opportunities to make safe, structured forays into the real world of work and adult responsibility in community-based, fully inclusive problem-solving roles.

Service-learning projects, in addition to the academic concepts they explore, also open doors to student reflection regarding central issues such as personal responsibility, the work ethic,
and our rights and responsibilities as citizens (Kielsmeier, 2000). These projects, when carried out successfully, empower students with the knowledge that they can change conditions for themselves, their families, and their communities (Taylor, 2002). This is often especially critical for at-risk students and students with disabilities, who have been significantly affected by negative messages, a sense of failure in school, and learned helplessness (Muscott, 2000).

Service learning can be visualized as a bridge between the concept of learning, typically thought of as something done in school, and the concept of service, a way of relating to the real world that engages the intrinsic motivation to help improve their own communities. Finally, service learning has a strong potential to engage students in thinking critically about their future occupations, the realities of the world of work, and the unquestionable relevance of education to their own destinies.

References


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