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Abstract

College institutions often emphasize the importance of service learning for their students. After research revealed a lack of volunteer opportunities for college aged individuals with disabilities, a pilot program was developed to examine the benefits of service for this population, as well as their peers without disabilities. The project involved college undergraduates and young adults with an intellectual or developmental disability. After a weeklong service trip together, benefits were discussed and evaluated. Benefits to the participants with disabilities included pride, skill development and generalization, empowerment, and increases in social interaction. Benefits to the participants without disabilities included positive attitude change, increased social interaction, and attainment of knowledge about social-justice issues.

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“PEOPLE ARE PEOPLE”: BENEFITS OF INCLUSIVE SERVICE

By

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Abstract

College institutions often emphasize the importance of service learning for their students. After research revealed a lack of volunteer opportunities for college aged individuals with disabilities, a pilot program was developed to examine the benefits of service for this population, as well as their peers without disabilities. The project involved college undergraduates and young adults with an intellectual or developmental disability. After a weeklong service trip together, benefits were discussed and evaluated. Benefits to the participants with disabilities included pride, skill development and generalization, empowerment, and increases in social interaction. Benefits to the participants without disabilities included positive attitude change, increased social interaction, and attainment of knowledge about social justice issues.

“People are People”: Benefits of Inclusive Service

In addition to the rigors of academics, students at secondary and post-secondary institutions often take the time to participate in volunteer activities. There are numerous reports in the research about the benefits of volunteering or service learning (SL) for these students. Little is known about the opportunities for this activity with regard to students who have disabilities. This research follows college students both with and without disabilities as they take part in a service activity as part of an alternative spring break program. The researcher is looking to find if college students with disabilities have the same perceptions about the benefits of SL as the college students without disabilities?

Literature Review

Service learning (SL) is defined by the National Service Learning Clearinghouse 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.” The intent of this teaching and learning pedagogy is to marry cooperative lessons with learning outcomes through direct service. Common SL projects include students without disabilities providing service to those with disabilities.

According to Gent and Gurecka (2001), people with disabilities being on the receiving end of service for so many years have perpetuated a sense of disablism, which “is a set of assumptions and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities.” (p. 36) Though this type service is meant to be a positive experience for all, what can end up happening is increased self-esteem for person without disabilities and an unintended devaluing of self-esteem for persons with disabilities. So in essence, this type of service encourages a societal viewpoint where

persons with disabilities are less than able, always receiving the services of persons who do not have disabilities. Gent and Gurecka's (2001) challenging point of view leaves others questioning SL and the role individuals with disabilities take in SL. Thus, the current trend in research explores individuals with disabilities as the givers of service alongside their peers rather than the receivers and its benefits in the areas of academics, social, and emotional/behavioral.

Academic Benefits

In the school system, there is an ever-demanding expectation that students with disabilities have the opportunity to access and actively participate in the general education, K-12 curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Most students begin some type of service learning activity as early as 4th grade, with most students really ramping up their service learning activities as high school graduation draws closer. Research has suggested that SL is one way that students with disabilities can access the general education curriculum. In particular, for students identified as having a cognitive impairment (CI), benefit from the authentic, and community based attributes of SL.

Miller, Hinterlong, and Greene (2010) explored SL in hopes to answer the following two questions: "How do model service-learning programs involve students with disabilities? and, how does involvement in a service-learning program benefit students with disabilities?" (p. 77). This study answered these questions by interviewing 19 college professors, students, and community partners engaged in seven model SL sites throughout Florida. Results indicated that academic skills gained while participating in SL were science research, art, public speaking, and writing. A teacher preparation site director had said, "with service learning or hands-on or different types of learning you tap

into different learning styles and you can tap into multiple intelligences” (p. 82).

Dymond, Renzaglia, and Chun (2007) found similar results while surveying focus groups that consisted of five inclusive high school SL programs; these groups were asked to determine whether key elements cited in literature for SL programs were truly important. This study did confirm the essential elements of SL and commented on how it allows for students to learn at their own pace in academic areas that can include functional life skills, physical education, mechanics, and horticulture, as well as, math, science, English, foreign language, and social studies. Not only does SL allow students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum but it also is a means to develop skills related to student’s individualized education program (IEP).

The case study by Gent and Gurecka (1998) followed one student with severe multiple disabilities in a sixth grade inclusive classroom engaging in an SL project by helping families on limited budgets get car seats for their newborn infants. Through this SL project, the student was able to meet set criteria for IEP objectives such as use of augmentative communication devices, mobility in an electric wheelchair, using an electronic switch to indicate choices, following a schedule, and self-management. Furthermore, Brill (1994) surveyed 13 teachers regarding the impact of involvement in SL on students with disabilities. Results indicated gains in organization and time on task for students with CI. Another study examined the benefits of volunteerism for 10 individuals with disabilities while they engaged in a SL project with 10 college undergraduates. Their project consisted of working together at the Trail of Peace in North Carolina for beautification and restoration. Miller et al. (2002) sums up these academic

benefits from inclusive SL, with the finding that students' increased in their ability to generalize new academics and skills to the classroom and other settings.

Social Benefits

Likewise, research has indicated similar results for students with CI in regards to social skills and the ability to generalize such skills. Students with CI in all the research noted a wider social circle and network of friends after participation in inclusive SL. Brill (1994) who surveyed 13 teachers regarding the impact of involvement in SL on students with disabilities found such results, as well as, the acquisition of group problem-solving skills, assertive behavior when meeting strangers, and sensitivity to the needs of others. Furthermore, students' communication with staff and adult volunteers improved and they learned how to write thank you notes. Miller et al. (2010) found similar results in regards to improvements in working with a group during her study after interviewing 19 college professors, students, and community partners engaged in seven model SL sites throughout Florida. The program director at one of the model schools explained, "When those kids got together, you could not tell who was in what class."

One study (Burns, Storcy, & Certo, 1999, p. 82) examined students' without disabilities attitudinal change towards students with severe disabilities. The study consisted of three groups with the first containing 12 students without disabilities and 8 students with severe disabilities creating a community garden on campus together through inclusive SL. The second group had 12 students without disabilities helping 8 students with severe disabilities at Special Olympics, a national organization that provides opportunities for individuals with disabilities to engage in sports. Here the students with disabilities were being the receivers of service rather than the givers of

service. And lastly, the third group was a control group made up 12 students in a social studies class who did not have any interactions with students with disabilities. Upon completion of the study, attitudinal questionnaires measured the perception towards students with disabilities. Results indicated that friendships and pairing preferences began to exhibit themselves throughout inclusive SL in group one without teacher facilitation.

Moreover, Miller et al. (2002) who examined the benefits of volunteerism for 10 individuals with disabilities while they engaged with 10 college undergraduates in a SL project involving beautification and restoration at a local trail. This study showed how SL was an opportunity to improve on verbal communication skills, social interaction, and relationship development among students with and without disabilities. Similarly, Gent and Gurccka (1998) found in their case study of one student with severe multiple disabilities in a sixth grade inclusive classroom that through SL the student better developed her communication skills, social skills, and choice making skills.

Behavioral and Emotional Benefits

As a result of improved social skills, research indicated improvements in behavioral and emotional aspects of students' lives during and after SL. After surveying 13 teachers and examining their responses on the effects of active participation in SL on students with disabilities, Brill (1994) discussed the stark decrease in school misconduct and the increase in appropriate behavior including maturity and responsibility in various settings because of the inclusive SL experiences. Consequently, students with disabilities served as better role models for each other and displayed an eagerness to participate in SL activities and other unrelated school activities. Similarly, one study (Miller et al.,

2010) after exploring SL through interviewing 19 college professors, students, and community partners who engaged in seven model SL sites throughout Florida observed higher self-esteem and an increased sense of empowerment in the participants after SL participation.

Furthermore, students with CI characteristically behave in a self-stimulatory manner but Miller et al.'s (2002) study examined the benefits of volunteerism for 10 individuals with disabilities while they engaged with 10 college undergraduates in a SL project involving yard work at a local trail in North Carolina. A decrease in self-stimulatory behaviors (e.g. rocking or hand flapping) resulted in increased focus and eagerness for all to participate in SL.

Through the areas of academics, social, and emotional/behavioral, research suggests that inclusive SL is a benefit for students with CI. This model allows students to learn and obtain new skills that may not otherwise be an opportunity in the classroom. This occurs by integrating community service with classroom content and reflection resulting in unique learning experiences, civic engagement and responsibility, and a commitment to and strengthening of one's community. SL opens doors for students with disabilities to access the general education curriculum in a unique multi-intelligence way, which would not necessarily be attainable in the stereotypical classroom environment. It is able to engage both students with and without disabilities in a rather hands-on, cooperative approach building bridges for social engagement amongst peers with and without disabilities. Furthermore, IEP goals can be achieved not only for academics but also socially and behaviorally. Significant changes in behavior due to inclusive SL strongly support such a model as well. Yet, very few studies were found on this specific

topic, which may suggest further research is needed in order to positively say that inclusive SL is an evidence-based practice. Nevertheless, inclusive SL is an avenue for individuals, teachers, and schools to show society that persons with disabilities can too be the givers of service and do not necessarily have to only be the receivers of service due to their disability.

The participants for this research took part in a weeklong Alternative Spring Break (ASB) trip to Chicago sponsored by the VISION (Volunteers Incorporating Service In Our Neighborhoods) Volunteer Office at Eastern Michigan University (EMU). As stated on the organization's website, the Mission of Alternative Spring break is to "raise awareness and educate students about social issues by sending them on a quality Alternative Break that will inspire them to reach out and become a leader and/or helper in their own community." Alternative Spring Break helps college students understand diverse social justice issues. Best Buddies creates opportunities for real friendships, integrated employment, and leadership development for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Combine them, and you have an inclusive alternative spring break (the second in the country), in which students with and without disabilities provided service in Chicago around issues of hunger, homelessness, and urban poverty. Participants were interviewed post-trip in an effort to explore the following question: Will college students with disabilities have the same perceptions about the benefits of SL as the college students without disabilities?

Method

Participants

There were 10 college age students who participated in this trip. The participants were students from Eastern Michigan University. Of the 10 college students, 4 are students who identify as having a moderate intellectual impairment. The students were accompanied by a faculty advisor who is an associate professor of the university. Ten college students, 4 with disabilities and 4 without were interviewed upon their return from ASB. These students were selected based on their interest and willingness to be interviewed and availability.

Program Description

The trip was organized with an inclusion basis making history being the second university in the nation to enact such a project. Participants on the trip were previously exposed to the idea of inclusion as they are all members of the social inclusion organization, Best Buddies. Organizers of the trip followed the guidelines and 8 components of Alternative Spring Break, which are strong, direct service, orientation, education, training, reflection, reorientation, diversity, and drug and alcohol free (Break Away). The weeklong trip included service at 4 nonprofit organizations in the Chicago area related to the social justice issue of hunger and homelessness. Participants were able to experience a range of service models in order to combat hunger and homelessness including soup kitchens (immediate assistance), a food bank (supplemental services), and an urban farm (preventative approach). After each service experience, the group would gather to reflect on their experience conversing about what they saw, how they felt, etc.

As previously mentioned, reflection is a key aspect of SL; therefore, participants ensured they engaged in quality reflections using various activities such as “what, so what, now what,” drawing perceptions, compare and contrast, high and low of the day, and more.

Procedure

The student researcher’s faculty sponsor interviewed the students without disabilities and the student researcher interviewed the students with disabilities. Participants were informed prior to the interview that all information collected would remain confidential; each signed a consent form. Both groups were interviewed with a set of questions designed to elicit opinions about the benefits of service learning and the impact that this particular experience had on them as individuals. Both sets of students’ interviews were audio recorded and supplemented with hand written notes. To ensure accuracy of transcription, each reviewer selected a random sample and transcribed twice. Additionally, for a random sample, the transcribers listened to and typed a four-minute sample of the other transcriber’s data. This inter-transcriber reliability was at 96%. The transcribers agreed to type every word or utterance made by the participants.

Data Analysis

In reviewing the recorded interviews and hand written notes, pictures emerged from each participant about their experience with this particular ASB trip. Words or sets of words, defined as key words, that were used together were looked for to describe the trip and each person’s feelings about the trip. Each participant told their own story of the moments that meant the most to them, the experiences that they learned the most from and how the experiences changed their behaviors once they returned home from the service.

Results

Through the strategy of key words, six overarching themes emerged in both participant groups, which include: emotional and behavioral changes, social interaction/inclusion, skill and knowledge development, satisfaction, empowerment, making a difference, and attitude changes.

Behavioral and Emotional Changes

The participants noted behavioral and emotional changes in themselves, each other, and their views on hunger and homelessness. As a result of this intensive experience, both groups experienced changes to his/her self. "It actually made me come out of my shyness a little more," describes a participant with a disability. Similarly, a college student explains, "It kind of built up my character. It made me feel that there are people out there who need help and I can be the one giving that help. It was rewarding to see other people smile and to make their day. It made me feel good to help." One college student observed a difference in her peers with disabilities, "Instead of asking, 'Can I have this for breakfast?' they just walked down and got their breakfast. They kind of lost some of the learned helplessness that sometimes happens." Upon returning home to their community, many participants commented on their new perspective on food. It has become a struggle for participants to discard food that they or friends don't finish eating knowing that there are people in Chicago and in their own community experiencing hunger. Furthermore, a realization during the trip amongst the group emerged that at any point in an individual's life one can experience hunger and homelessness. "They may not have enough money for their cell phone, for their food, for electricity bill...I mean they face, we all face a lot of

barriers so it's you, me, and them. We get back up. We don't let them get in the way. We get back up," a reflection from one of the four individuals with a disability.

Social Interaction and Inclusion

The next theme is social interaction: inclusion. As previously mentioned, all participants are familiar with the inclusive practices. The experience reinforced the college students' passion for inclusion and was "reassuring to the buddies that yeah people just see me as a person." A college student noted that it was not only a benefit for the college students and peers with disabilities but "a huge benefit for the people who were receiving service and the people who were directing us to give service." The organizers of the trip made a conscience decision to not tell the service organizations that their group included individuals with disabilities. Participants felt they were included by the agencies giving every participant an opportunity to perform service work. However, their service experience at an urban farm was commented on by each participant expressing his or her disgust, sadness, and disappointment when the organization's gardening coordinator communicated her frustrations in not being informed ahead of time regarding the make-up of the group. Despite this instance, the participants expressed an overwhelming sense of inclusion and its importance during this trip and in every day life. This college student conveys each persons' feelings perfectly,

"I think that we had individuals with disabilities was great, but I don't think it's a big deal. I mean that it's any different; we were very inclusive. I don't understand why people make it a big deal. They worked just as hard as us. I don't know way I'm saying us; they are us. It is hard sometimes to see why people put them aside in a different category because they are just another person. It was a really great

trip. I don't think you need to mention there were people with disabilities on the trip. It was just an ASB trip."

Skill/Knowledge Development and Learning

An element of the Alternative Spring Break experience is to learn extensively about all aspects of a social justice issue. In this case, participants interviewed expressed the skill and knowledge gained regarding hunger and homelessness. An overall sense of development in being judgment-free, understanding, empathetic, and open-mindedness emerged from all participants. Participants also learned specific skills needed to perform the service such as shoveling dirt, working in a kitchen, serving food, washing dishes and tables, and interacting with those receiving the service. Participants were left with more awareness the prominence of hunger and homelessness. Moreover, the realization that anyone can experience hunger and homelessness as expressed by one of the college students with a disability, "I learned that we shouldn't take anything for granted. Be thankful for what we have...It really helped me learn that these people can't live without food. That's just a fact...I learned that people don't have what we have and I learned that it can happen to all of us."

Satisfaction, Empowerment, and Making a Difference

Every participant interviewed expressed how he or she believed they made a difference in someone's life. Similar comments such as "knowing I could help someone. Even though it was small I was able to make a difference in someone's life" emerged. Not only were participants conveying how they made a difference in others' lives but how it was life changing for them. For example, "It touched me...and maybe I can help somebody someday...It made me feel good about myself helping somebody...It might

have touched me but it touched them as well...It helped me be a better person,” explains one participant with a disability. Furthermore, a college student communicated her belief that this trip changed perceptions of the people we worked with regarding the abilities of people with disabilities and inclusion. They were able to make a difference in the minds of those they served, the organizations they worked with, and the university.

Attitude Changes

Due to the experience, participants displayed an evident attitude change regarding hunger and homelessness. Many commented on how the experience changed their perspective on the social justice issue and on their life. For instance, as put by this college student, “We came back and we wanted to make a difference...my commitment had changed I really want to keep doing something and definitely continue our strive toward helping people who are hungry and homeless.” The idea of “it could happen to anyone”, as previously mentioned, continued to emerge amongst the participants as well as the notion of recognizing the person and not just the situation they are currently experiencing. “I don’t think I view them so much as a person who just needs food, but to see more of the person. We’re all people, we all need food, and we need to survive. My accessibility is a lot different than what others have, but at the end of the day we are all still people.” stated by another college student.

Discussion

Although the study presented here is based on interviews with participants of ASB, a service-learning model, the implications of this work are not limited to service-learning programs that follow the ASB model. The results of this study indicate potential success for future implementations regarding inclusive practices and the

benefits of service learning for students with disabilities. Similar benefits for participating in such a trip were identified by both groups. Therefore, college students with disabilities did have the same perceptions about the benefits of SL as the college students without disabilities. The themes of empowerment, learning, and inclusion all have the potential to play an important role in the development of becoming active citizens in society for young adults with and without disabilities.

Conclusion

Engaging individuals in inclusive service-learning opportunities can bring about a new appreciation for the role every person can play in their communities, as well as the important contribution each person can make regardless of their ability level. People are people whether they have a disability or are experiencing hunger or homelessness. Recognize the person first and not just their label. They can make a difference in this world.

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