Incorporating Service Learning and Character Education in a Multicultural Learning Disabilities Students’ Classroom
Susan Mooney
Glen Forest Elementary School
Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools
Submitted June 2001

Background
This study, researched by a third year special education teacher, took place at Glen Forest Elementary School in Falls Church, Virginia just seven miles from the nation’s capital. Glen Forest has a culturally diverse student population with students from 58 different countries who speak 23 different languages. This diversity is a rich resource that provides many opportunities for students and the community.

The Caring Kids Club is a service learning club which involves third grade learning disabled students. The project goal was to develop self-concept and the values of integrity, responsibility, honesty, and empathy though service projects and character education. Reflections and connections were an integral part of each Caring Kids meeting. Results include an increased positive self-image, increased willingness to accept responsibility for one’s own actions, and a greater degree of being in control of one’s own life on the part of the students.

Introduction
In the beginning of the school year, fourteen learning disabled students from nine different ethnic backgrounds committed to be members of a club that emphasized character development and service learning. This club’s main objective was to gain a better understanding of one’s self (character) and the diverse environment in which they lived. This objective was to be met through character education, service learning projects, and reflection. Throughout this nine-month study, their teacher learned many valuable lessons relating to time management, enriching student learning by integrating character education and service projects into the curriculum, building a sense of community beyond the immediate classroom and helping students develop a sense of responsibility and respect for others. The teacher learned valuable lessons through research, practice, and many times, by default. Together, the class and the teacher realized how much planning and organization it takes to get a service project started, how to manage time in order to have club meetings and how to work cooperatively. They became keenly aware of the culturally diverse surrounding community. Results indicate that through planning, participating, and reflecting, students connected with their communities in several different ways and increased their self-awareness. Service activities included helping to plan a food drive, educating a kindergarten class about pollution, making projects with first grade classes, baking holiday cookies, writing to members serving in the armed
forces, making Mother’s Day crafts, and various other activities. Reflection took place before, during, and after each monthly activity.

This project also sought to build a better self-concept and increase student motivation and self esteem. At class meetings the teacher tried to create an open, caring environment where each child was encouraged to participate through character education lessons and games.

Goal

The goal of the project was to assess what influence character education and service learning had on culturally diverse learning-disabled students. What are the advantages to having class meetings and lessons that revolve around shared personal experiences and character education? Would learning disabled students gain a better self-concept through direct teachings of character traits? Does service learning and character education increase student motivation and self-concept? The teacher wanted to know if there was a direct correlation between service learning and character development and increased student motivation and positive classroom behavior.

The Students

In the beginning of the school year, fourteen third and fourth grade learning disabled students spent their two-hour language arts period in a special education, pullout setting. This group consisted of students from 10 different countries, each with another language spoken in their home. From September through December, this was the target group. In the beginning of the school year, a classroom club was incorporated which revolved around service learning and character education. The class knew what would be expected of them if they decided to be part of the club. It was important for them to decide if they would like to join. There was to be no “dropping out” of the club, in order for the students to gain a sense of commitment. The class was told that club members would participate in service activities, have class meetings, and most importantly, learn about who they are and what they are capable of becoming. There was an immediate, positive response from the students. It was obvious that they were excited to be part of something special. Unfortunately in the month of December as the school-wide learning disabilities population grew, a different teacher began to service the fourth grade learning disabilities students. Due to scheduling issues the fourth grade students could no longer be involved in the project.

Data Collection

It was decided that it was important to collect data in a variety of ways. The method of collecting data would be qualitative. The teacher would be looking for a change in attitudes, beliefs, and opinions, which could be difficult to measure. It was decided to use surveys, questionnaires, personal observations, small group discussions, and journal writing to analyze and reflect on throughout the study. The teacher surveyed the class and asked them about their specific attitudes and beliefs relating to hunger, homelessness, service-
oriented occupations, the elderly, and poverty. This took place during the first quarter. The survey also consisted of true and false statements about their self-concept. For example: I feel I am a good reader; I do one good deed a week; I do one good deed a day; I am organized; I can be anything I want to be when I grow-up, and so forth. The students were also given another questionnaire assessing their knowledge of terms relating to service. Questions were multiple choice, fill in the blank, matching, and pictorial responses. If a child could not communicate best by writing, the teacher asked the student the questions, giving them an opportunity to respond orally. For example: 1) Volunteering means a) Doing something and getting paid, b) Doing something because you have to, c) Doing something because you want to; 2) What do you wish you could do better; 3) What words do you think of when you hear the words, homelessness, hunger, poverty; 4) What do you wish were different in your community?; 5) What activities do you do after school? The same survey was given at the end of the school year and findings were compared.

The teacher also kept a journal and recorded the minutes of Caring Kids Club meetings. The classroom designated a bulletin board to display any articles students brought in about service or positive happenings around the world, community, home or school. The class also displayed photos, student artwork, and writings.

The students also kept weekly or bi-weekly reaction sheets. These helped them to see how effectively they were using their time and provided the teacher with valuable information including possible attitude changes. At the beginning of every meeting a sheet was handed out with the following questions:

- What was the high point of the week?
- Who did you get to know better this week?
- What major thing did you learn about yourself this week?
- How could this week have been better?
- What did you waste time on this week?
- List three decisions or choices you made this week. What were the results of these choices?
- Did you make any plans this week for future events?
- Open Comment:

Considering that learning-disabled students benefit from a structured environment, it was decided that the class would have a Caring Kids Club meeting every Thursday afternoon which was when this reaction sheet would be distributed. This was a convenient time for the teacher because on Thursday afternoons the instructional assistant was not in the room. This made it difficult to teach smaller groups thus necessitating whole group activities. In the past, whole group activities had been challenging due to the diversity of the learning disabled group. Meetings proved beneficial for all levels of students and helped to build a cohesive and self-enhancing classroom climate.
Strategies and Activities

In the beginning of the school year the idea of this club was introduced and explained. Students had the option of either choosing to belong to the club or not. Every student chose to be a member. The teacher explained that they could not "quit" the club once they had joined because the club members would need each other to learn from in order for the students to gain a sense of commitment. This was particularly important at a school such as Glen Forest. Survey results indicated that many of the students did not belong to a club or participate in recreational sports outside of school. They engaged in very limited extracurricular activities. It was the feeling of the teacher that this is a direct result of their parents having to work multiple jobs, limited transportation, and a possible language barrier resulting in the parents not knowing what is available for their children in the community. The teacher wanted for them to realize that they had to follow through and cooperatively work with one another.

During the first meeting the class elected possible names for the club and wrote them on the chalkboard. Students came up with several good choices which included The Helping Hands, Friends of Glen Forest, The Volunteers, and the Caring Kids Club. The class voted and the Caring Kids Club was incorporated.

The next week the class made tie-dye shirts, which they would wear when participating in Caring Kids Club activities. This activity was not only fun but also built a sense of cohesiveness among the group and increased enthusiasm about being a member of the club. After they tie-dyed the shirts and hung them out to dry, the class noticed that no two shirts were alike. Hence a teachable moment, just as no two shirts were alike, no two students in the club were alike. Each student and shirt served a purpose and was beautiful in its own way.

In October, the class planned the first Caring Kids project which was making a Halloween craft with a first grade class. The teacher and class planned this project three weeks in advance. The purpose of the project was to assist the first grade in making a Frankenstein terra-cotta pot to keep their Halloween candy in. The Caring Kids planned during club meetings. They paired each LD student with one or two first graders. Then, they wrote the project directions on individual index cards because each third grader would be in charge of what their first grader would do. Next, the Caring Kids sorted all the materials each individual group would need for the project. The Caring Kids were then ready to go on their first Caring Kids outing, which was referred to as "the first mission."

The project went smoothly and all students had a great time making the pots. The teacher took pictures to hang on the designated Caring Kids bulletin board. It was stressed to the third graders that they would not be making a pot for themselves and that the candy was for the first graders. The teacher wanted the Caring Kids to realize that their reward was not tangible but more internal.

Upon leaving the first grade classroom the Caring Kids had a meeting to discuss how they thought the project went and their feelings about the project. Reflection is a very important aspect of a service activity. Every response was positive. One student who is not a proficient reader himself said, "I really liked helping my partner read the directions." Another student who was working with
one of the less than perfect students said, “X was really well behaved. He was really polite and nice too.” The teacher had warned her that she had to be extra patient with this boy and that he may have trouble with directions. When listening to her work with this child she used phrases that she had obviously heard used by teachers. The teacher told her she was a natural teacher and she was more than pleased. This is a child who would hide under her desk and become so frustrated it would bring her to tears on more than one occasion. This experience had given her something to be proud of. At the close of the meeting, the Caring Kids had left over candy. The teacher asked the students what they should do with the leftover candy. Not one student asked if the Caring Kids could have some. They decided to give the candy to a kindergarten class. The next day, the teacher gave each child a picture of themselves with their partner. Later in the week, the first grade class came to the Caring Kids classroom with thank you posters. They displayed them around the classroom.

The above service experience is at a basic level. An example of a more intense service project would be volunteering at a homeless shelter or starting a soup kitchen. It is up to the teacher to decide what is realistic and age appropriate for his/her student population. Service learning strives to weave connections and build bonds between people for the benefit of the great and smaller communities that exist (Fitzgerald, 1997). The Caring Kids participated in a Caring Kids Club activity almost every month with character education lessons that corresponded with each activity. The activities were:

- September- Formed the club and made the rules
- October- Halloween Activities with a buddy class
- November- Food Drive
- December- Baked Cookies for school personal
- January- Wrote holiday letters to people in the Armed Forces
- February- Made Valentine treats
- March- Interviewed an elderly family member
- April- Cleaned up school community, put on a recycling play for kindergarten
- May- Planted Mother’s Day flowers, wrote poems
- June- Reflection, volunteer awards ceremony

Evidence and Conclusions

In recent years, community service ideals have been promoted in the national political agenda (LeSourd, 1997). The commitment demonstrated by the enactment of federally funded National and Community Service Trust Act provided impetus for action at the local level and throughout the nation (Quinn, 1993). Educators throughout the country have begun to integrate service learning as well as character education into their curriculum. Many believe that children from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds benefit from these promising teaching methods.
When this research project began the teacher primarily focused on character education and how it would benefit her multicultural, special education class. The teacher had planned on teaching several character traits outlined by The Character Education Partnership located in Washington, DC. These traits included, respect, responsibility, honesty, integrity, civility, civic-mindedness, fairness, compassion, courage, loyalty, and truth. In a multicultural classroom, the teacher assumed that the definitions of these traits would vary. The teacher questioned what kind of ethical challenges and value differences would emerge. The overall intention was to instill character traits, which are essential for the success of all students and our society alike.

Educators know that children learn best by taking part in hand-on activities. The teacher then wanted to put the learned character traits to work. The teacher was interested in measuring the success of the character lessons. Engaging students in responsible actions for a common goal better measured the success of the project.

Written reflections provided by the students clearly showed better understanding of the character traits, which were previously taught. For example, the teacher believed that the Halloween project increased the self-esteem in a child who had some emotional problems stemming from a poor self-image. In her journal she had written that she “felt good” being able to help a first grader. She felt “like she was good at working with little kids,” she felt that she “taught the student just like a teacher.” In order to confirm this assumption the teacher interviewed the student and asked the school counselor and teacher if they had seen any positive change within the student. The student had mentioned starting a club in her neighborhood and told the counselor that she “was going to help people” and mentioned the club on more than one occasion.

In conclusion, social and emotional growth was recognized in all Caring Kids throughout the school year. There was a direct link between increased motivation and service learning and character education. It is believed that service learning experiences connect students to their communities, enrich students’ learning, and help them develop personally, socially, and academically (Fitzgerald, 1997). Through service learning it is believed that students learn to understand the meaning of community beyond self and develop a sense of responsibility and respect for others (Fitzgerald, 1997). The teacher who researched this project feels that the Caring Kids became less egocentric as a result of being a member of the Caring Kids Club. The Caring Kids became more generous and began to put others before themselves frequently.

The teacher felt that the character lessons and club meeting formed a positive classroom environment where children felt comfortable taking risks. Disruptive classroom behavior was not accepted and was discussed at Caring Kids meetings. The special education teacher, who had never held class meetings, felt that this was an effective way to teach problem solving. As a result, positive changes occurred and the need for classroom discipline went down. The class reflected on their differences and would offer to help one another. Reflections in journals and weekly reflection sheets clearly showed comprehension of character traits, which students began to internalize.
With proper planning and a defined goal, service learning and character education can be especially beneficial in a diverse classroom. Recognition of others’ ideas and beliefs is a common educational goal which can be met through cooperative service projects. Group differences and cultural diversity gives the teacher a genuine experience to teach that each human being has value, worth, and can make a difference.

References