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Intersecting & Intertwining Processes: Student-Directed Service Learning and the Demystification of Special Education

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Student-Directed Service Learning
and the
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Abstract

High school graduation rates depend in part on successful transitions from middle school to high school. For Special Education students in particular, programs are needed to address their academic, social, and personals needs in preparation for this important developmental shift. Service Learning and the Demystification of Special Education process are two approaches that have proven helpful. The purpose of this paper is to identify the intersecting and intertwining ways that these two approaches can be combined for student success. After reviewing the history and research related to service learning and programs designed to demystify the concept of Special Education, the paper proposes an integrated curriculum applicable to middle schools students across the country.

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Introduction

Watching my student Hector slap peanut butter and jelly onto dozens of pieces of white bread I am reminded of my mother.

The nights I found my mother hands deep in ground beef, I knew that our regular mom-and-me homework session, family dinner, and TV time was not going to happen. Tonight we were going to St. Columbus.

She would shout, "Is your homework done yet Michael?" as she began to shape three huge mounds of what would become enough meat loaf to feed all fifty men at the homeless shelter.

I watch Hector and the other student in the assembly line load PB&J sandwiches into bags, and bags into boxes for the food bank.

I thought back to those nights in our kitchen. I hated the rush of what these nights often became, but I knew, because of both from my mother's passion and my own conscience, that I shouldn't hate them, but, in fact, should love them.

Loading up the old Volvo station wagon and making our way down Spruce Street and through West Philadelphia, was just the beginning of our weekly trip to St. Columbus. Missed TV shows and unfinished homework became secondary as we began to talk about our friends at the shelter. My mom had a way of shifting our focus to what really was important.

"Friends!" Jose shouted to us, standing on the porch waiting for our arrival. His distinct body odor and alcohol stained breath had become comforting and familiar over the years. Jose was one of many at the shelter who was always around, week after week,

year after year. He had become for me the face of "the millions of people hungry and homeless in our country" of whom my Catholic school's religion teachers spoke. From the time I was five until my teenage years, my family's tradition of service became part of who I was, what I stood for, and how I understood my city.

The men's eyes lit up as the tinfoil peeled off the disposalable aluminum tins. They waited eagerly in line. Two big pieces of meatloaf, a heaping spoonful of creamy mashed potatoes, a healthy pile of mixed vegetables, and two dinner rolls filled each of their plates. There were always enough for seconds and sometimes thirds. Ice creams sundaes ended our evenings; mom always let us partake in this part too.

"Be generous with the proportions," I reminded Hector and the other students twenty years later. I had now become the organizer of this important work. They responded by doubling the amount of PB&J that went on each sandwich. I wondered if they approached the experience with the same mixed feelings that I had experienced as a child.

It wasn't until I was twelve that I felt comfortable walking over to an empty chair and joining the men in conversation. I did my best to pretend I knew about Philadelphia sports teams as they did their best to engage me in conversation. "Should be an interesting season for the Phillies," was a safe line I could use. For me, it was always more about the listening than the talking. Trying not to stare, I was curious about their stories. My mom always reminded us that everyone had a story. Over the years, the stories I heard illustrated "the causes" of hunger and homeless that I would later read about as an adult. Addiction, depressions, mental illness, and loss of employment were just some of the character plots in the collected story of my St. Columbus friends.

My sixth graders had it a little easier; they weren't thrown out into the dining room to discover their own learning. They took part in a year-long service-learning project where they met with coordinators from the homeless shelter and food bank.

Our drive home felt so different from our drive there. I experienced a natural high that came from the feeling of having done good work. The ride home offered a time to reflect on the experience and gave me a place to compare worlds and understand how fortunate I was.

On weekends, when Mom would take us into the streets to demonstrate our commitment to finding and funding lasting solutions for the hungry and homeless, I learned how to advocate in the most direct form. I remember shouting, "Free 1515" outside another shelter in the city whose doors were about to close. Although I had never met any of them, my passion for the women and children of 1515 Girard Avenue was grounded in my experience at St. Columbus.

"Free 1515" passed through my mind over and over again as I watched Hector spout off his powerful monologue about ending hunger and homelessness in Philadelphia. I held onto our shared passion for making something better for someone else. I was happy to watch and know that Hector was experiencing what I experienced at his age.

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In kindergarten I had the chickenpox; that week, while I watched cartoons, the other kids learned everything you needed to know in order to succeed in school. At least that's how it seemed to me. I have struggled all through school with the fact that I learn differently, and for a long time I blamed all of my struggles on that week. I imagined my classmates spending those five days learning the secrets of reading and writing.

I was a successful boy outside of the classroom, engaged in the arts and some sports, but in the classroom, and even at home at night, when I looked at my brother and sister reading or doing homework, I knew that it was easier for them because they hadn't missed that crucial week of kindergarten. I didn't let it get me down though, I simply poured my abundant energy into the things I loved.

It was Hector's energy outside the classroom, his ability to laugh hard, that reminded me of myself. I remember paying close attention to him even before he was put on my caseload. Despite his laughter, I knew that he was feeling pain from the difficulties he experienced in the classroom.

In first grade, I remember reading sight words over and over again from list A. My classmates had moved on to lists B, C, D, but I remained on list A for the whole year. I remember lying curled up on our family room couch, flash cards in hand, wondering whether my classmates read faster because of what they had learned that week in kindergarten.

Throughout my primary grades, I was pulled out of the classroom to go to Ms. Smith's trailer for extra reading support. Only the animal cracker treat at the end of each

session kept me from feeling completely excluded because I couldn't learn with my friends. I was always the struggling reader who feared reading out loud in class, the one studying the extra two hours for Friday spelling test, the last one to finish copying the notes from the blackboard.

I often walked into Hector's Language Arts classroom to find him with his head down; I had to nudge him gently to sit up. My presence alone changed his demeanor. He knew someone was finally there to break longer texts down with him, read out loud with him, and help him make sense of all those words.

It was during my first year in high school that my learning difference became more apparent to my mother. My school required three years of a modern language and three years of Latin. My grades in English, Spanish, and Latin did not compare to those in other subjects. Even after private tutors and hours of homework each night, my grades did not improve. At the end of my freshmen year, my mom met with the school counselor and decided that an educational evaluation should be conducted.

The written report that came out of this assessment changed nothing. It was never shared with me or my teachers, and no substantial recommendations were produced. The report went into a desk drawer at my house. I continued to struggle in school, unable to feel pride in my work or my academic ability. I did what I had to do to survive my classes.

"How do we encourage Hector to read more?" asked his parents at our annual meeting to develop his Individualized Education Plan (IEP.)

"It would help if he could read out loud to you. Then you could ask him to summarize the text." We reviewed a sheet of general comprehension questions that

they could use at home with their son. Hector's parents were always upbeat and encouraging once they understood what his difficulties were.

It was not until my junior year of college that I took courses in education and began to explore, understand, and process my learning style, differences, and needs. I suffered from severe testing anxiety, in part because memorizing small bits of information was extremely difficult for me. When a capstone history course in my senior year culminated in a standardized multiple choice test, I proposed to the professor that I write an integrated paper as an alternative form of assessment that was better suited to my learning style. He was pleased with my assessment of my learning and agreed.

Designing alternative assessments that showed off my learning in college was liberating and led to a huge boost in my self-confidence. By meeting with professors and paying close attention to what methods worked and didn't work for me, I began to form a more solid sense of self-awareness. *This process was the forerunner of the "demystification of special education" that I explore and link to self-advocacy in this thesis.*

I was able to continue to make sense of my educational journey as I became a teacher. I wanted to pass this process on to my students so that they would not have to wait until they were in college to understand how they learned and make the most of their education.

When I went to St. Columbus, I learned about people from a world different from mine and I learned how to advocate for them. This was part of a longer process through which I learned to advocate for myself. It was through experience that I discovered that

learning to self-advocate intersects and should be intertwined with the ability to advocate for others.

All advocacy begins with understanding. Jose was a mystery to me until my mother began the process of demystifying the less fortunate. I was a mystery to myself but over many years, I learned to understand and appreciate my own abilities. These are the experiences I want to bring to my students: to understand and advocate for themselves through understanding and advocating for others.

Part One: Service Learning

Introduction to Service Learning

Learn and Serve America defines service learning as "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" (Learn and Serve 2010). Educational practitioners all over the world use service learning to teach students about their communities and the world around them. When the two very distinct elements of service and learning are combined into one educational experience, students have the opportunity to apply their academic skills and knowledge to real-life needs in their communities (McPhearson 1996). Service learning provides classrooms and educational institutions with a platform for real world learning while creating positive change in communities. Educators can engage students in learning activities while teaching them to become positive agents of change.

Service learning fulfills the description of "experiential learning" popularized by David A. Kolb, an American educational theorist in the 1960's, who drew heavily on the work of John Dewey and Jean Piaget (Furco 1996.) According to Kolb, knowledge is continuously gained through both personal and environmental experiences. In order to gain genuine knowledge from an experience, the learner must be willing to become actively involved in the experience; the learner must be able to reflect on the experience; the learner must possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience; and the learner must possess decision making and problem solving skills in order to use the new ideas gained from the experience. (Itin 1999)

Often contrasted with rote or didactic learning, experiential learning represents the results of reflecting upon one's actions in the world. Experiential learning is related

to, but not synonymous with, experiential education, action learning, adventure learning, free choice learning, cooperative learning, and service learning. (Furco 1996) It is also important to note the distinction between service learning and community service, which does not typically include an academic component and is often a form of volunteerism. In contrast, by integrating community action with academic study, service learning offers the possibility of making learning more intentional through student research, reflective writing, group processing, and other academic and critical activities. Unlike community service, Service Learning may be viewed as a pedagogy, philosophy, or framework. Service Learning is often a collaborative effort between more than the two parties through which outside agencies frequently collaborate and act as liaisons with those serving and being served. (Sausjord 1995)

Service learning has been a part of the K-12 educational landscape for more than thirty years, but is currently practiced in less than thirty percent of K-12 schools in the United States. It has, however, achieved a substantial footing in American institutions of higher education and in the primary, secondary, and higher education systems of many other countries (Spring, Grimm, and Dietz 2008). Skepticism over the educational merit of service learning continues despite research that consistently shows positive outcomes for students. Indeed, reviews of K-12 service learning research include close to 70 studies, most of which have found positive impacts on participating students' academic, civic, personal, social, ethical, and vocational development. (Billig & Klute 2003)

History of Service Learning

As a form of experiential education, Service Learning has roots that go back to Aristotle's dictum, "For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them." (Bynum 2005) As a way of raising students' consciousness about community needs and democratizing schools, we look to the early years of the 20th century.

As the acknowledged leader of the Progressive education movement, John Dewey suggested that actions directed toward the welfare of others stimulate academic and social development (Dewey 1938). William Heard Kilpatrick, who coined the term "Project Method," argued that learning should take place in settings outside of school and involve efforts to meet real community needs (Kilpatrick 1925). Unfortunately, during the "me decade" of the 1980's, community service declined or became firmly de-emphasized in school environments.

Immediately prior to the 1990's, a resurgence of community service, especially when tied to the curriculum, was in process even though large-scale implementation was hampered by a lack of infrastructure. The service learning movement lacked key components of lasting reform: consistent research-based practice standards, strong professional development, high-quality summative and formative evaluation, and a consistent funding base. In addition, it was difficult to make the case to parents and school administrators for service learning as a way to drive achievement. (Kielsmeier 1991) Advances in curriculum and professional development were led by nonprofits and supported largely by private foundations and corporations, particularly, the W.K. Kellogg

Foundation and State Farm Insurance.

The renewed focus on volunteerism in America led to the passage of the National and Community Service Act of 1990. This legislation, signed into law by President George H.W. Bush, created the Commission on National and Community Service, an independent federal agency. The Commission was charged with supporting four streams of service: service-learning programs for school-aged youth; higher education service programs; youth corps; and national service demonstration models. (Learn and Serve America 2009)

In addition to the Commission on National and Community Service, a bipartisan group of Senators working with the Bush Administration drafted legislation to create the NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps,) a demonstration program designed to explore the possibility of using post-Cold War military resources to help solve problems at home. The NCCC, enacted as part of the 1993 Defense Authorization Act, is a residential service program modeled on the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps and the United States military. (Learn and Serve 2009)

Both the NCCC and the Commission on National and Community Service would later be incorporated into the Clinton Administration's National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. Introduced by a bipartisan coalition of Members of Congress, the act was signed it into law by President Bill Clinton on September 21, 1993. The legislation created the Corporation for National and Community Service, whose mandate was to administer Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America with the responsibility of mobilizing Americans into service.

A major breakthrough for service learning occurred with the 1994 National and Community Service Act which created Learn and Serve America in order to provide direct and indirect support to K-12 schools, community groups and higher education institutions for facilitating service learning projects. This was to be accomplished by: providing grant support for school-community partnerships and higher education institutions; providing training and technical assistance resources to teachers, administrators, parents, schools and community groups; and collecting and disseminating research, effective practices, curricula, and program models. It has also provided a statutorily mandated National Service Learning Clearinghouse, which offers resources and information for teachers and other practitioners who want to implement classroom-based service learning; community organizations; and researchers who want to build on the base of existing knowledge. (Learn and Serve America 2009)

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was enacted by Congress and signed into law by President Bush in January 2002. Known as NCLB, the act reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and provides federal funding for many educational initiatives including programs for economically disadvantaged youth and families, migrant students, English language learners, and other targeted populations. NCLB is widely known for its strong accountability provisions and its emphasis on helping all students meet state proficiency standards for mastery of reading/language arts and math. However, many of its provisions indirectly encourage or allow the use of service learning as a strategy for engaging young people in their own success. Indeed, while not specifically mentioned in NCLB, service learning can be used as a program strategy for implementing nearly every part of the law. (Hutton 2006)

For example, as long as data are provided as evidence of effectiveness, service-learning strategies can be used for meeting reading/language arts, math, and science standards; for 21st Century after school programs; migrant, bilingual, and Indian Education programs; gifted and talented programs; and safe and drug free schools and communities programs. Other opportunities inherent in NCLB include using service-learning strategies in character education programs, for energizing parent and community involvement, for linking K-12 education to higher education, and for providing services such as family literacy and migrant support. (Billig 2000)

Perhaps because the emphasis in NCLB is on accountability, many schools interpret the use of NCLB funding very narrowly, viewing it as applicable only to activities directly related to student achievement. In these cases, it has been difficult to argue that funding service-learning will help them accomplish their purpose of improving test scores. Thus, service-learning advocates need to arm themselves with data showing the efficacy of service-learning and demonstrating that service-learning engages students in academic content and motivates them to retain what they learn. If service learning is to earn the support of skeptics, programs must be carefully designed to include the components and strategies necessary for optimal results. . (Billig 2000)

Although participation in service learning grew with the passage of early laws, reauthorization of the 1994 legislation faltered until 2008. Funding for Learn and Serve remained flat, and in real terms, it declined. Ironically, many schools seem to have embraced the notion of service for young people; 68% of American K-12 schools, for example, now recognize student service or offer service opportunities (Spring, Grimm, and Dietz 2008) but most have neglected to link it to their school curricula, missing an

important opportunity to improve academic rigor. At many institutions of higher education, service programs fall under the heading of community relations rather than academic affairs. In addition, programs at every level often adopt a paternalistic "knight-in-shining-armor" approach to volunteerism that fails to recognize community assets. (Cramer 2010)

The most important recent development in the service learning field occurred in 2008, when evidence-based standards and accompanying indicators for K-12 practitioners were released to ensure high-quality service-learning practice. For decades, those involved in service-learning had known that quality matters if service-learning is to live up to its promise of helping young people grow academically as well as in civic engagement. At last, educators now have a set of standards and indicators to guide them in improving their practices. The following K-12 Service Learning Standards provide a framework for Quality Practice:

- *Meaningful Service*- Service-learning actively engages participants in meaningful and personally relevant service activities.
- *Link to Curriculum*- Service-learning is intentionally used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards.
- *Reflection*-Service-learning incorporates multiple challenging reflection activities that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society.
- *Diversity*-Service-learning promotes understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants.

- *Youth Voice*- Service-learning provides youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning experiences with guidance from adults.

- *Partnerships*-Service-learning partnerships are collaborative, mutually beneficial, and address community needs.

- *Progress Monitoring-Service*-learning engages participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals, and uses results for improvement and sustainability.

Duration and Intensity- Service-learning has sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet specified outcomes. (Cramer 2010)

These carefully crafted guidelines include detailed indicators of progressive development and mark service learning as a pedagogy of engagement applicable as a learning strategy at every level of schooling and in every discipline. (Learn and Serve 2009) As testimony to their value, the Peace Corps has embraced the standards in the schools they serve in 74 countries; internationally, Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Alberta, Canada, have also investigated adopting these standards in their service learning efforts.

Academic Achievement & Social Development

The benefits of service learning for students extend beyond providing opportunities for experiential learning. Research shows that incorporating service learning into students' lives leads to academic, social, and personal growth.

Based on 20 years of teaching service learning in the classroom and a review of research in the field, Conrad and Hedin (1989) hypothesize that well-designed service learning programs could have positive effects on youth in the following areas:

Personal Growth and Development

- Self-esteem
- Personal efficacy (sense of worth and competence)
- Ego and moral development
- Exploration of new roles, identities, and interests
- Willingness to take risks, accept new challenges
- Revised and reinforced values and beliefs
- Taking responsibility for, accepting consequences of own actions

Intellectual Development and Academic Learning

- Basic academic skills (expressing ideas, reading, calculating)
- Higher-level thinking skills (open-mindedness, problem solving, critical thinking)
- Content and skills directly related to service experiences
- Skills in learning from experience (to observe, ask questions, apply knowledge)
- Motivation to learn and retention of knowledge
- Insight, judgment, understanding—the nuances that can't be explained in a book or lecture but are often the most important things of all to know

Social Growth and Development

- Social responsibility, concern for the welfare of others
- Political efficacy
- Civic participation
- Knowledge and exploration of service-related careers
- Understanding and appreciation of, and ability to relate to, people from a wider range of backgrounds and life situations

Conrad and Hedin (1989) recognize that service learning and its outcomes are difficult to evaluate because service learning is not a "definable activity like taking notes at a lecture," and because students participate in a wide variety of activities and experience them in different ways. Further, it is difficult to measure growth and development because many factors, including the effect of the service experience, can come into play. Currently, however, researchers are working to quantify the effect of service learning on youth development.

In an experimental study, Conrad and Hedin (1981) administered a battery of pre-post instruments to more than 1,000 students (ages 12-19) enrolled in 27 high-performing experiential learning programs, as well as to a group of comparable students (matched for age, grade, geography, grade point average, and socioeconomic status) not engaged in experiential learning. The instruments measured changes in students' attitudes toward school and engagement in learning, as well as several psychological, moral, and social-developmental changes. Students in the experiential learning group expressed higher interest in and motivation for learning than did students in the comparison group. The researchers also found that engagement in community-based experiential learning activities exposed students to opportunities known to mediate academic achievement, including opportunities for students to act autonomously, develop collegial relationships with adults and peers, and boost their self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy. (Conrad and Hedin 1981)

Increased motivation toward school and more positive attitudes toward learning have also been reported in several other quasi-experimental studies of service learning

(Melchior 1995; Melchior 1998; Laird and Black 1999; Hecht 2002; Brown, Kim, and Pinhas 2005). For example, Melchior (1998) analyzed academic data from students enrolled in seventeen middle and high schools operating high-quality service learning programs. Relying on more than twenty measures from pre-post surveys and school records, he noted statistically significant differences in the areas of school engagement and performance in mathematics between service learning students (n = 608) and comparable students (n = 444) not engaged in service learning. In his follow-up assessment, Melchior found that most of the specific academic performance gains noted among service learning students had disappeared one year later. However, student engagement in learning remained significantly higher for service learning students than for students who did not participate.

Scales (2000) also reported significant pre-post changes in motivation for learning, engagement in school, and overall academic success among middle years students (n = 1,153) enrolled in three schools. At the start of the school year, students were randomly assigned to teams in their schools. Half of the teams participated for at least a semester of service learning, while the remainder served as controls. In addition to social and personal outcomes, the researchers assessed students' commitment to class work, engagement in school, perceived scholastic competence, and personal sense of intellectual achievement responsibility, all through a pre-post instrument. When compared to students in the control group, service learners maintained a stronger pursuit of better grades and showed less decrease over time in their commitment to school work. (Furco 2010)

Because of the important role that standardized subject-matter exams play in schools, researchers have explored the relationship between service learning and performance on academic-content examinations. For example, Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, and Rovner (1998) assessed differences in reading and language arts performance between primary and secondary school students (n = 775) enrolled in twelve classrooms that offered service learning and students (n = 310) from eight comparable classrooms that did not. To assess the effect of academic service learning, this study concentrated on fifteen classrooms in which service learning was well-designed and well-implemented, based on a set of established quality indicators. The researchers identified eight classrooms with characteristics (grade level, nature of student body, etc.) similar to those of service learning classrooms to serve as comparison sites. They collected scores on students' subject-matter achievement tests, surveys assessing students' attitudes toward school and community service, and observations of classroom practice. Findings revealed statistically significant differences between the two groups, with service learning students outperforming the other students in the reading and language arts portions of the California Test of Basic Skills. In addition, the students engaged in service learning reported that they had learned more in their service learning classes than in nonservice learning classes. (Furco 2010)

Service learning has become an important strategy for encouraging positive youth development and civic contribution by young people. Through service learning, young people experience valued civic participation in their communities and learn to identify community problems, prioritize solutions, and implement problem-solving strategies (Finn and Checkoway 1998). Service learning can help students develop civic

motivation, skills, and commitment to continue contributing to civil society and democracy (Flanagan and Sherrod 1998).

Young people's values and motivations predict participation in service activities (Zaff and Michelsen 2002). Youths disposed to participation before service learning experiences may gain the most from the experiences (Zaff, Malanchuk, and Eccles 2008). Alternatively, service learning can motivate young people to engage in civic activity. Metz and Youniss (2005) found that high school students who were more inclined to perform voluntary service were not negatively affected by mandatory service. That is, being required to serve didn't have much effect on those already inclined to volunteer. However, among the group less inclined to service, those required to perform service showed a greater likelihood of civic interest and understanding, future voting, and conventional civic involvement after their experience.

On the other hand, mandatory service may not always be beneficial. Covitt (2002) found that among 6th through 8th graders, girls had more positive attitudes about required service than boys, and white students had more positive attitudes than black students. Interestingly, student attitudes about mandatory service requirements, but not about the requirements themselves, had an effect on their intentions, caring, and sense of responsibility. Students who had more negative attitudes were less likely to feel a responsibility or express an intention to serve. It may be, then, that mandatory community service would not have the long-term effects of increasing volunteerism that proponents expect, at least for youths who perceive themselves as least likely to volunteer on their own initiative. (Covitt 2002)

Evidence shows that across the high school years, service learning experiences tend to help young people become more informed and engaged citizens. These findings support the aspirations of families, educators, and policy makers. Service learning is linked to positive youth development and to the growth of positive civic characteristics and behaviors. The benefits of service learning programs appear to outweigh any drawbacks. (Covitt 2002)

Given the variation in the success of these programs, more nuanced practice is needed, and the recent K-12 Service Learning Standards for Quality Practice should provide some guidance. It is clear, however, that teachers and other practitioners should give young people opportunities to develop and implement service learning projects and should provide the time and direction needed to reflect on the learning and the service that students accomplish through their work. This process can have the added benefit of ensuring that youths are pursuing initiatives that interest and engage them. Furthermore, given that parents and the broader community are part of the civic context and can support young people's service learning experiences, educators interested in service learning can do more to encourage parents to talk with their children about the projects and to connect the projects to activities outside of school. (Zaff 2010)

Middle School

Current statistics reveal staggering problems in the American school system. Nearly one in three high school students fails to graduate. Among minority students, the problem is even more severe: nearly 50% of black and Hispanic students do not complete high school on time. A young person drops out of school every 26 seconds, which means

that about 7,200 students disappear from our schools every school day. However, students often decide to leave school long before they reach high school. (Swanson 2008)

Too often, the choice to drop out is made during the middle school years when students decide that school really isn't for them. Students begin sending signals that they are off the path toward graduation as early as 6th grade, according to researcher Robert Balfanz. In *Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path,* he identifies factors that correlate with low graduation rates: "We found that 6th graders who failed math or English/reading, or attended school less than 80% of the time, or received an unsatisfactory behavior grade in a core course had only a 10% to 20% chance of graduating on time" (2008: 4).

For these students, the consequences of dropping out are tragic. According to a report from America's Promise Alliance, those who drop out of high school are more likely to be incarcerated, rely on public programs and social services, and go without health insurance than those who graduate (Swanson 2009). Experts also say that dropping out of high school affects not just students and their families, but the country overall, including businesses, government, and communities. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) estimates that high school dropouts from the Class of 2009 will cost the United States more than $335 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity over the course of their lifetimes.

But why do students leave school when the negative implications of this choice are so great? As part of surveys for the landmark report, *The Silent Epidemic* (Bridgeland 2006), students who dropped out reported that they lacked a connection to school;

surprisingly, nearly half (47%) said the major reason they dropped out was simply that classes were not interesting! In a Gallup Student Poll, half of the students polled reflected a sense of hopelessness for the future or lacked a sense of engagement or enthusiasm for school (Lopez 2009).

The educational opportunities we provide students must align with what the research tells us about the characteristics and needs of young adolescents regarding their physical, cognitive-intellectual, moral, psychological, and socioemotional development. According to *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*, "Young adolescents undergo more rapid and profound personal changes between the ages 10 and 15 than at any other time in their lives. Although growth in infancy is also very extensive, infants are not the conscious witnesses of their own development."

Service learning speaks to the heart of what we know about young adolescents. They prefer active learning over passive learning. They prefer interactions with peers. Although they may seem uninterested in conventional academic subjects, they are intellectually curious about the world, and they "respond positively to opportunities to connect what they are learning to participation in real-life situations such as community service projects; and ... are generally idealistic, desiring to make the world a better place and to make a meaningful contribution to a cause or issue larger than themselves" (NMSA 2010: 57-58). Service learning, a form of active problem- and project-based learning, uses integrative instruction and addresses these developmental needs.

In talking about how he didn't graduate on time, one young man recently told a group of researchers in Minneapolis about how service learning helped him reengage in

school. Faced with academic and family struggles, Lafayette was ready to give up until he was pushed to give back to his community. The experience of building something lasting in his community and the opportunity to be a mentor to younger students got him back on track and inspired him to make sure his middle school-aged brother got involved earlier than he did. (Payne 2010)

Service learning has roots in youth development. Service has long been viewed as a powerful way to develop character, foster an ethic of service, and nurture a sense of membership in the community. In the agrarian culture of the 19th century, youth were essential for the survival of the family and the society. They naturally developed a sense of personal value and an understanding of their role in the community as they provided for the family, cared for animals, and planted and harvested crops.

As our society moved from agrarian to urban, it has not developed d appropriate ways for youth to gain a sense of purpose and become connected to their communities as they move into adulthood. As Harold Howe states, "We have no use in our economic system for young people between the ages of twelve and eighteen, and precious little use in our community affairs. So we suggest you sit quietly, behave yourselves, and study hard in the schools we provide as a holding pen until we are ready to accept you into the adult world" (Howe, quoted in Boyer 1987b, p. 7).
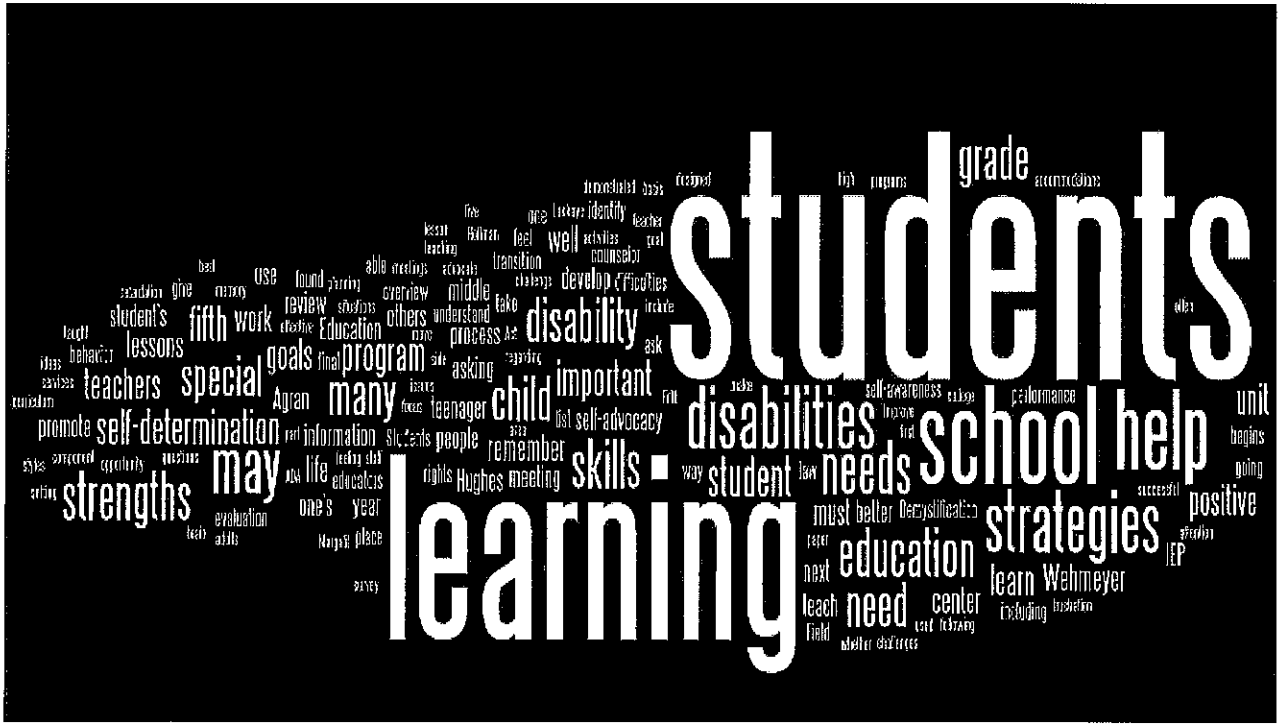
Part Two- The Demystification of Special Education

Nature of and Need for Demystification

Students often endure their special education careers with a sense of frustration and defeat after having many experiences with failure and confusion. Students with learning disabilities may lack a positive or realistic self-concept (Hoffman, 2003), experience negative moods, and rate their self-efficacy as low in comparison with students without disabilities, including those who demonstrate underachievement (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006). Helping these students develop awareness of their learning styles, including their strengths and needs, allows them to overcome negative self-attribution (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006), make positive choices (Hoffman, 2003), in addition to developing and achieving personal goals (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; Lackaye & Margalit, 2006; Schreiner, 2007). When students achieve self-awareness, gain knowledge of the supports available, and develop a realistic view of how their goals and skills can be matched, the foundation for self-advocacy and self-determination is laid (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; Schreiner, 2007).

Demystification is a process that helps special education students develop self-awareness and self-realization. Developed by Mel Levine (2002), demystification entails conversations between educators and students individually or in small groups to help them understand what their strengths are, where they need assistance, and how the school or teacher will help them. The focus is positive, and exact terms, technical or lay, are used. The goal of demystification is to clarify any misconceptions students may have about their needs or difficulties, describe possible options to help with remediation, instill a sense of optimism, and allow students to fully participate in their educational planning and programs. (Merlone 2008)

Research has demonstrated that while special educators value the development of awareness and self-determination in students, many feel they need training and information in order to help accomplish this work (Browder, Wood, Test, Karvonen, & Algozzine, 2001; Mason, Field, Sawilowsky, 2004).

Sample Demystification Program

In 2008, Lynn Merlone and Dolores Moran developed a program designed to teach students about special education, learning styles, coping strategies, and self-advocacy. Their ten-week unit incorporates activities related related to self-awareness and self advocacy drawn from both the self-determination literature and from Levine's model of management by profile.

The ten-week curriculum has two sections. The first five lessons are taken from Mel Levine's book *All Kinds of Minds* (1993), an overview of his work written for students. Many students with learning and behavioral challenge have difficulties with executive function which make tasks such as planning, understanding, attending, and remembering arduous and frustrating (Brown, 2008). In the introductory lesson, the program likens the brain to a control center that houses a huge storage area full of files, identifies parts of the brain, and reviews some of their tasks. During the next four lessons, the program focuses on attention, memory, organization, and behavior. Each lesson begins with an overview of the function, includes an activity to self-assess the student's strengths and needs in that area, and ends with strategies for improvement. . (Merlone 2008)

The second group of five lessons, derived from the curriculum *Who I Can Be is up to Me* (Campbell-Whatley, 2004), teaches the students about special education and self-advocacy. As educators, we need to teach and model the perseverance that the students will need in order to handle the challenges of their learning disabilities (Brown, 2008). This section begins with a True/False survey to measure the students' perceptions regarding of the implications of having a learning disability.

During the course of these next five weeks, learning activities give students definitions of disabilities; teach them about famous people who overcame learning difficulties; present an overview of the process of identifying and recommending placement in a learning center; show them how to self-advocate and ask for help; and examine the best way to overcome frustration and improve their attitudes.

The last phase consists of an exit interview with the guidance counselor. Here, students review their special education file, including test results, the IEP, and relevant documentation regarding response to intervention. The final feedback tool for this unit is the file review with the guidance counselor. This meeting begins by acknowledging that while the student is aware of his or her learning difficulties, the purpose of this meeting is to focus on the student's strengths and needs. This in itself is an empowering experience for the students who may be genuinely surprised to learn about the areas in which they excel in – or to discover that they do, indeed, have strengths. The conversation usually leads to a discussion of multiple intelligences, careers that might make use of these strengths, why certain interventions are part of the student's program, and the student's goals for the future. (Merlone 2008)

The challenge in assessing the effectiveness of such a program is that it is hard to determine whether students actually apply the skills they learned in the classroom to real life settings (Browder et al., 2001). If students are to apply and benefit from this work, middle school learning specialists need to be kept informed, and at least some of the skills taught need to be included in the students' Individualized Education Plan (IEP.)

Promoting and Teaching "Self" Skills

Promoting the self-determination of students with disabilities has become an essential component of many educational transition programs (Hughes, 1998). Halloran (1993) referred to self-determination as education's ultimate goal. Wehman (1993 identified enhanced student choice as one of the most critical transition issues for the 21st century, and the Division of Career Development and Transition recently released a position statement emphasizing the importance of self-determination for youth with disabilities (Wehmeyer 1998). Szymanski (1994) suggested that in order to empower students through the transition process, interventions must be placed under maximal student control and should be designed to facilitate individual independence and autonomy.

One of the primary instructional activities that can promote self-regulation of learning and, ultimately, promote self-determination, is the use of student-directed learning strategies. These include self-management strategies that involve teach students to modify and regulate their own behavior (Agran, *1997*). Research in education and vocational rehabilitation has shown that student-directed learning strategies are at least as successful as, teacher-directed instructional strategies, and that these strategies represent

an effective means for enhancing learning across a wide age range of students with a variety of disabilities. Self-monitoring and self-recording procedures have also been shown to improve the motivation and performance of students with disabilities (Kapadia & Fantuzzo, *1988;* Malone & Mastropieri, *1992;* McCarl, Svobodny, & Beare, *1991.*

Self-instructional strategies that include verbalizations that students use to cue, direct, or maintain their own behavior have also proven to be beneficial (Hughes & Agran, *1994). A* number of studies have found that self-instruction training is useful for increasing job-related (Salend, Ellis, & Reynolds, *1989)* and social skills of individuals with mental retardation. (Hughes, Harmer, Killian, & Niarhos, *1995;* Hughes, Killian, & Fischer, *1996)* Self-instruction was found to improve essay composition skills of students with learning disabilities (Graham & Harris, *1989)*

Self-reinforcement, another component of self-regulated learning, also leads to inproved performance. For example, Frea and Hughes *(1997)* used a combination of self-reinforcement and self-monitoring procedures to improve the social performance of students with mental retardation in a school setting. Martella, Leonard, Marchand-Martella, and Agran *(1993)* used a combination of self-monitoring, goal setting, and self-reinforcement to decrease the negative conversational statements of a student with mental retardation. To date, there has been limited information about the degree to which teachers promote their students' self-determination and teach students self-directed learning although Agran, Snow, and Swaner *(1999)* conducted a statewide survey in Utah of teacher perceptions of the benefits of self-determination, the degree to which teachers taught their students strategies that promote self-determination, and the extent to which

self-determination-related goals and objectives were included in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). (Gilberts 2001)

Promoting Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy is the ability to understand one's strengths and needs, personal goals, one's legal rights and responsibilities, and communicate these to others. Because students live with their learning struggles on a daily basis, they must learn how to maneuver life's challenges and obstacles to make sure their needs are met. (Dawson 2008). In the past, self-advocacy was a term applied primarily to adults with disabilities, but recently more focus has been placed on teaching this skill to preteens and teenagers The earlier we teach our students to advocate for themselves, the more prepared they will be for the future. Whether in the workplace or on a college campus, children must understand their strengths and limitations, and how they affect performance, and the ability to communicate this to other people. (Dawson 2008)

In the early years, parents are the best advocates for their children. Jodie Dawson, PsyD., developed the following framework for teachers and parents to help promote Self-Advoacy Skills-

- *Understanding Learning Problems:* Young people say they need to understand how they learn and want to be able to express this information in "plain English." They need to become aware of their strengths and needs; strategies that help them succeed; accommodations that bypass limitations; and the kind of environment that facilitates learning. To gather this information, they should review assessment results with the specialists who tested them; talk to their teachers and/or tutors; and reflect on their own learning challenges, successes, and preferences.

- *Practicing Communication:* A key component of self-advocacy is knowing how to communicate knowledge about one's the learning process to others. Before meeting with teachers or counselors, students need help preparing, planning what they will say, and making notes to take with them. Role playing is a useful way to practice communication skills and anticipate situations with greater confidence.

- *Identifying Supporters:* Students need to identify their members of their support system early on. Do they trust and feel comfortable talking to parents, relatives, teachers, administrators, counselors, mentors, tutors? They need to know where to turn for help, especially once they leave home.

- *Meeting with Teachers:* High school students can practice communicating with teachers and other school staff by setting up regular conferences with their teachers. This provides opportunities to identify areas of success and challenge, to get feedback, and to work out plans for improvement.

- *Knowing His Rights:* Students who have been formally identified with a learning disability (LD) or diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), may be protected under federal law. Students should learn whether they are covered under any of these laws and, if so, what entitlements they have:

  - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees special education and related services to eligible children with disabilities.
  - Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of a disability in programs that receive federal monies.
  - Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in employment, public services, and accommodations.

Students with learning disabilities who have an IEP and receive special education services are protected under IDEA until they graduate from high school with a diploma. Section 504 and ADA may protect them in college by providing "reasonable

accommodations." In the professional world, adults with a disabilities are usually

protected under ADA. (Dawson 2008)

Part Six- Project Explanation

Part Six- Project Voice Explanation

Introduction

The proposed project integrates two specific approaches that lend themselves to integration and collaboration: an adaptation of MyVoice, a student directed year long service learning project approach, and a newly designed program to demystify special education by using a series of strategies that help learners understand their strengths and needs. MyVoice is part of a year-long curriculum that was created by Need In Deed, a Philadelphia non-profit organization that helps implement Service Learning in classrooms. The demystification framework draws upon Mel Levine's work as well as numerous other resources. The program is designed as a yearlong middle school experience and is particularly appropriate for sixth graders. The project includes five components, each of which includes an overview, an explanation of each stand alone framework, and a section that explains the two can be combined.

Part One: Valuing Whole Student

Objectives:
- Students will be able to identify strengths and needs in the community.
- Students will be able to identify their individual strengths and needs as learners.

From the very beginning of the school year, teachers must demonstrate that they value students as whole persons. Setting high expectations and allowing students' interests, capabilities, and real characteristics to present themselves creates the possibility of an authentic learning environment. The first stage of the project challenges teachers to value the individuals in the classroom. A significant amount of time needs to be spent on community building within the first few weeks of school. Setting firm expectations for student participation, appreciating one another's differences and talents, and listening and speaking skills are essential for success for the remainder of the year. Valuing the social development of our students before diving into academic work is essential for the success of the service-learning project and also for special need students to develop the courage demystify their learning abilities.

Rationale for Integration:

Both the service-learning and demystification frameworks provide natural introductions to classroom community-building in the first few weeks of school. The service-learning framework surveys the group for issues while drawing on the strengths of the community. The demystification framework surveys individual students' strengths, challenges, and ways of relating to the community of learners. A final reflection activity helps students see that there are strengths and needs in both their local community, similar to themselves as learners.

My Voice Framework:

The first part of the MyVoice framework, "Value Your Voice," recognizes students' gifts and talents and then enables students to decide on a broad issue for their service learning project. Key components include helping students identify the classroom as a community; understand that they can have an impact on that community; and get involved in choosing an issue. The primary goal is for students to choose one general social issue to research and address in the coming year. Encouraging students to reflect on social issues that affect their community is a starting point. By reading print materials, watching local television, searching the internet, taking community walks, and interviewing students and adults, a list can be generated. An issue can be chosen based on relevance to class community, student interest, community partner access, learning opportunities, and service opportunities. Reaching consensus is essential before moving onto the next stage.

Demystification Framework:

The first phase in the demystification framework, helping students explore who they are as learners, can be a raw and revealing process. Students will feel comfortable exploring themselves early on only if they must feel strong continuous support from their teachers who are committed to showing students that we are all learners with unique strengths and challenges. The majority of the activities and protocols developed in this first section are whole class experiences. For example, on day one, students play a game in which they are asked to silently stand on a line if a statement applies to them. Statements start with low risk, ("Stand on the line if you like to movies,") become more and more personal as the game proceeds. ("Stand on the line if you really dislike reading

in front of the whole class.") This activity enables students to find connections between their own learning preferences and those of their fellow students. Throughout the framework, reflection activities are essential for success. Students are asked follow up questions about the statements they felt comfortable about and those that were hard to identify with. Other activities that draw on student interests, family and friend support, and other areas that represent the whole student or learner are also conducted during this part of the program.

Part Two: Outlining Objectives

Objectives:

-Students will be able summarize the cause and effects for a given social issue.

-Students will be able to summarize characteristics for a given learning disability.

Overview:

Drawing on the multiple activities and reflections in part one, students begin to crystallize their project while drawing on teacher support and frequent individual check-ins. Drawing on the momentum and authenticity of the work already completed, students begin to organize their information.

Rationale for Integration:

The natural connections between the exploration of causes and effects of social issues and the characteristics of special need learners can be made transparent. Similar graphic organizers and protocols are intentionally used to help students make subtle and/or even passive connections between the two processes.

My Voice Framework:

Here, students examine the causes and effects of their chosen issue, narrow the range of their exploration, and focus on a particular, manageable aspect of the problem. Activities are designed to help students brainstorm the questions that will direct their research. Students are guided to explore the complexities of their chosen topic, and together decide on an essential question and project objective. Through a series of learning activities, including but not limited to KHWL charts, exploding the issue charts, reading real-life stories, and meeting with community partners, students become able to outline their objective in a clear and concise way.

Demystification Framework:

A series of learning activities enables students to begin explore the brain and understand how and why our minds work the way they do. Using student friendly texts and audio visuals, students learn about the science behind learning disabilities, differences, and special education. Students focus on their particular disability and make connections from part one to the information presented to them.

Part Three: Investigate the Issues

Objectives:

-Students will be able investigate their social issues by connecting with community partners and using other resources to enhance their understanding.

-Students will be able to connect with field experts to gain a deeper understanding of how their learning challenges relate to the bigger field of special education.

Overview:

A great deal of time and energy is needed in part three of the service-learning framework to make the work as meaningful as possible for students. Here, the facilitator acts as a conductor, allowing individual student projects to take their own course and providing connections and resources along the way.

Rationale for Integration:

Both frameworks show students that community and learning issues are not unique to a small group of people and should not only be written about but also acted upon. These issues come alive as students hear from experts in the field and make connections with others.

My Voice Framework:

The students complete learning activities for their project by researching and seeking out problem solving strategies. Academics come to life for students through collaboration with community partners, meeting and learning from people who have personal experiences with the issue, collecting and analyzing information, and applying academic skills to real-world problems.

Demystification Framework:

The focus is on exploration and investigation about the student's learning style and making connections to the larger world. The whole class learns from outside speakers and small group meetings with the School Psychologist and Learning Specialists to explore relationships between their strengths and challenges and how they relate to their specific learning style/disability. Students will conduct surveys with other students, their parents, and others in the community to explore and increase their comfort with having special needs. Videos, books, and presentations introduce famous writers, athletes, politicians, and artists that have learning challenges and/or disabilities to increase their awareness and comfort.

Part 4: Creating Opportunities

Objectives:

-Students will be able to conduct meaningful service that directly relates to their social issue.

-Students will be able to demonstrate understanding of their learning style/disability, self-awareness, and advocacy skills.

Overview:

Students begin to apply their knowledge to meaningful service activities through hands-on practice for others and themselves. In collaboration with community partners and other local resources, students will engage in meaningful work contributing to the overall success of their projects.

Rationale for Integration:

As students conduct meaningful service and show off their self-awareness and advocacy skills, they experience growth. Reflection experiences need to be carefully constructed to help students acknowledge their service towards and with others as well as for themselves.

My Voice Framework:

Service can be broken into three categories: direct, indirect, and advocacy. Within those categories, there are countless ways for students to tackle social problems. Here, students begin to conduct meaningful service that addresses the root cause or effects of the issue. This builds students' sense of purpose and capability by calling upon them to act and speak out on behalf of others

Demystification Framework:

Students are challenged to take their understanding of their own learning style and apply it in practical ways. They reexamine notes and reflections from part one and identify specific scenarios in which they struggled with a given subject, task, or teacher. Role play and scenarios to help students begin to build self confidence and advocacy skills. A final framework reflection activity invites students to write a letter to their teachers explaining who they are as students with their strengths, challenges, needs and goals/aspirations.

Part Five: Expressing Connection & Celebration

    Objective:

        -Students will be able to celebrate their service and learning accomplishments by reflecting on their work throughout the year.

        -Students will be able to celebrate their courage and work by reflecting on their learning style/disability and projecting future goals and accomplishment.

    Overview:

The final portion of the project includes a culminating celebration of student success, courage, and hard work, an acknowledgment of challenges, and a commitment to to continue their work.

    Rationale for Integration:

Posing specific reflection questions and having students share simultaneously about both frameworks helps students gain a greater appreciation of their ability to advocate for others and themselves. It also helps students recognize the ways in which the two frameworks have intertwined throughout the year.

    My Voice Framework:

This is a time for students to be recognized for their efforts. Acknowledging students' accomplishments is a major component of any service learning project. Culminating events show students that their efforts have not gone unnoticed, encourage engagement in future service, and bring closure to the project. The goal is for students to use their gifts and talents to demonstrate their new understanding.

Demystification Framework:

Students can document their work in a variety of ways. Reading and listening to the letters that students have written to their teachers can be a powerful experience for all. Bringing community partners, school staff, and parents into this portion of the project is essential to show students they are not alone and that they have the support of others. It is important to spend time reminding and showing students the process through they have moved. Having students prepare presentations and/or short stories that outline their work can be a rewarding final project.

Project Assessment & Evaluation

Protocols for assessment and evaluation of students' performance and overall effectiveness of the program have not yet been developed. Students will be surveyed prior to project's initiation to document their prior knowledge and understanding. Survey data will help teachers and facilitators of the program implement more meaningful experiences. The data will also be used throughout implementation and help measure students growth as objectives are assessed. Culminating assessment and evaluation will be conducted both qualitative and quantitative means. Through post-experience surveys, performance assessments and student interviews, an evaluative summary will be drafted at the culmination of the project.

Conclusion

Thomas Hehir, Profesor of Education at Harvard and the former director of the U.S.Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, addresses the challenges of eliminating ableism in schools. He writes that ableism is essentially like racism, sexism and homophobia, "It's societal prejudice against people with disabilities, some of which is blatant—like when disabled people aren't able to attend an event because they use a wheelchair—and some of which is more subtle, such as the desire for disabled people to perform life tasks in the same ways as nondisabled people." Challenging us to rethink what Special Education should look like, he suggests that special education should be working toward "minimizing the impact of disability and maximizing the opportunity to participate in the world." (Hehir 2002)

Recognizing that special education needs to be special, Heir acknowledges the benefits of inclusion but is practical about the fact that students also need to be pulled out of mainstream educational settings to receive "special" programs. Our programmatic goals always need to minimize the disability and maximize student participation. Hehir gives us permission to create and explore programs similar to the ones explored and described in this paper. We need to co-create educational tools and programs for and with our students in order to prepare them for life beyond classroom.

After reviewing the history and practice of service learning and the concept and programmatic approach to the demystification of Special Education, I believe that the framework I have proposed will increase student's academic, personal, and social success and that with the development of additional tools, assessment strategies and professional

developent programs, middle schools will be able to implement this proposed program

for increased student engagement and success.

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Appendix A

Independence Charter School

About Independence Charter School:

Independence Charter School (ICS) is a community-oriented public K-8 school located in Center City Philadelphia. ICS's primary mission is to provide an intellectually stimulating curriculum with an international focus. Our world culture curriculum emphasizes the arts, languages, ideas, and histories of numerous world cultures and supports second language acquisition. All students at ICS study Spanish within two distinct FLES programs: the Spanish Enhanced program, which includes thirty minutes of Spanish daily; or the Spanish Immersion program, in which students begin in Kindergarten with a 90% Spanish and 10% English infusion. By fifth grade, that balance is 50/50. Older students are also introduced to Japanese and Arabic in once-weekly sessions as they continue their Spanish studies. By the time they graduate, all ICS graduates are bilingual and biliterate in Spanish and have introductory knowledge and skills in Arabic and Japanese.

ICS serves over 700 students from almost every zip code in Philadelphia. It was founded in 2001 by a group of parents and community members devoted to raising their families in Philadelphia. These founding members developed ICS's mission and program, and many remain instrumental today as parents of current students and in founder seats on our Board of Trustees.

ICS was founded in recognition of the fact that advances in the technologies of communication and transportation have brought us all closer together; the world is shrinking. Never before has our children's ability to communicate and understand peoples from around the world been so crucial to the well being of our communities. In addition, recent discoveries in child development indicate that children are capable of far more at younger ages than had previously been recognized, and that children retain knowledge longer if they connect not only cognitively, but emotionally and physically to the material.

As a result, ICS emphasizes multi-lingualism for even the youngest students. It draws upon parents, families, community members, and senior citizens who can share their knowledge, experiences, and ideas. It takes full advantage of local cultural and educational institutions, museums, and businesses to further broaden the perspectives of the students. It incorporates modern communications and computer technology to facilitate dialogues with, and learning from, children around the world. In sum, ICS imbues all students with a greater appreciation for, and understanding of, a diverse array of cultures and ways of thinking and living through an active, hands-on, multidimensional approach to learning and development. And, it does so while reaffirming our commitment to the importance of the existence of vital, strong public education to the city and the nation.

The Name and Values:

While the focus at ICS is squarely on fostering knowledge of a diversity of cultures and countries, the school does not lose sight of two of the key traditional goals of

public education: teaching young children the fundamental values of our pluralistic democracy, and the acquisition of the basic language, literacy, and computational skills necessary to function productively. The school believes that it is never too early to begin the process of teaching children to become competent, thinking citizens.

The name of the school—Independence—is, therefore, not merely an empty reference to the famous Declaration penned by Thomas Jefferson less than two city blocks down the street from the original school location. Rather, the name represents something fundamental about the mission of the school: to allow for the development of independence of thought and ideas, and to ground students in the values inherent in our democracy, while at the same time exposing them to cultures and ways of living different from their own.

World-Class Curriculum:

Charter Schools, by law, have the freedom to determine the philosophical and curricular framework that will guide teaching and learning at their school. Charter School Boards of Trustees are responsible for making decisions regarding this framework, selecting curriculum which compliments the Mission and Vision of the School as written in the charter school application. Independence Charter School has selected top-flight, rigorous educational standards in each of the main subject areas, modifying materials and approach to coincide with the school's mission and vision. ICS recognizes that students come to school with varying levels of experience and readiness. Furthermore, ICS understands that students need a rich and varied learning environment that recognizes the

multiple learning modalities of students. The curriculum and curricular approaches

adopted by ICS address learners diversity while promoting a high level of excellence.

Appendix B

Profile of Need In Deed:

Since its founding in 1987, Need in Deed's mission has been to prepare youth for civic responsibility and service to others, enabling young people to become capable, contributing members of their community. Working primarily in Philadelphia public schools, we use our *My Voice* service-learning framework to help students make positive and productive connections between classroom academics and real world experiences. This way, students gain an understanding of the practical applications of the subjects being taught in the classroom and adults recognize the valuable contributions young people can make toward addressing problems in their communities.

The Need in Deed Teacher Network is a community of teachers committed to using Need in Deed's *My Voice* service-learning framework to advance the achievement of goals for their students, including:

- engagement in school
- acquisition of problem solving skills
- civic engagement
- personal/social development
- academic achievement

The Network provides participants with opportunities to study effective service-learning methods, share resources and lend valuable support to their peers.

Need In Deed believes building and fostering service-learning practices in schools order to establish a positive and engaging learning environment for students. The Need in Deed Teacher Network is a sustainable mechanism for accomplishing that goal within the School District of Philadelphia – the geographic focus of our work.

Through the My Voice process, students learn practical application for what they are studying in the classroom, and adults recognize valuable contributions that young people can make in addressing problems in their communities.

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