Inclusive High School Service Learning Programs: Methods for and Barriers to Including Students with Disabilities

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to determine methods for and barriers to including students with disabilities in high school service learning programs (HSSLPs) with non-disabled peers. Focus groups were conducted with adult stakeholders at five schools nominated as having exemplary inclusive HSSLPs and at least 3 years experience implementing such programs. Methods for including students with disabilities addressed the categories of activity selection and structure, collaboration, expectations, encouragement, grouping, and modifications. Barriers clustered around the areas of teacher attributes and experience, organizational structure, planning, resources, and student characteristics. Implications for inclusive education, universal design for learning, access to the general curriculum, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and instruction are discussed.

Service learning is a form of pedagogy that enables students to meet their educational goals while providing service to the community (Fertman, 1994). It offers hands-on, problem-based learning that is focused on meeting community needs and enhancing school-community collaboration (Fager, 1996; Perkins & Miller, 1994). Service learning offers a departure from traditional pedagogy by linking academic content, standards, and vocational goals addressed in the classroom setting with hands-on service activities that meet authentic needs in the student’s community (Gent & Gurecka, 1998; Hamilton & Hamilton, 1997). Almost half of all high schools nationally are reported to have service learning programs (Skinner & Chapman, 1999).

A service learning project typically includes four components: 1) learning (i.e., preparation for the activity), 2) service (i.e., performing the actual service), 3) reflection (i.e., processing what was learned), and 4) celebration (i.e., of accomplishments) (Fertman, 1994; Gent & Gurecka, 1998). For example, students might initially learn about homelessness in class and then engage in service activities at a local homeless shelter or soup kitchen. After the activities, students reflect on what they have learned. Educational goals (e.g., math, social studies, literacy, social skills) are embedded across classroom and community activities. Some of the benefits that have been attributed to service learning include an increased appreciation for diversity, heightened self-esteem and motivation, access to relevant learning contexts, the development of citizenship skills, an understanding of how to work collaboratively with others, and the establishment of connections to the community (Allen, 2003; Billig, 2000; Briscoe, Pitofshy, Willie, & Regelbrugge, 1996; Eisler, Budin, & Mei, 1994; Fager, 1996; Nelson & McFadden, 1995).

Service learning is increasingly being employed with students with disabilities. As a form of pedagogy, it supports many of the widely accepted tenants of effective curriculum and instruction in secondary special education. For example, it addresses academic, social, vocational, and life skills curriculum content in settings where the skills can be applied (Brill, 1994; Burns, Storey, & Certo, 1999; Everington & Stevenson, 1994; Yoder & Retish, 1994). Because service learning frequently occurs in the community, students receive instruction in inclusive settings with...
people who do not have disabilities (Burns et al.). This in turn increases their visibility as contributing members of society (Everington & Stevenson; Kleinert et al., 2004) and expands the notion of “community-based instruction” to include volunteer work (Burns et al; Dymond, 2004). It also provides a vehicle for connecting students to socially significant projects where they can make a difference in their school and community (Gent & Gurecka, 1998; Muscott, 2001). All of these practices have the potential to assist students to generalize skills from school to real-life applications, build competence across skill areas (e.g., social, academic, behavioral, life skills), develop career awareness, and prepare for the transition to adulthood (Brill; Burns et al.; Dymond; Everington & Stevenson; Kleinert et al.; Carty & Hazelcorn, 2001; Muscott; Yoder & Retish).

Descriptions of service learning programs that include high school students with disabilities have profiled segregated and inclusive programs. In segregated programs, service projects are completed solely by students with disabilities. Typically these projects involve students from one particular disability group (e.g., emotional and behavioral disorders, severe disabilities, learning disabilities) and the service project is completed by an entire special education class. Examples of segregated service learning programs are widely available in the literature (see Abernathy & Obenchain, 2001; Everington & Stevenson, 1994; Frey, 2003; Jackson, 1996; Krajewski & Callahan, 1998; Carty & Hazelcorn, 2001; Muscott, 2001).

In inclusive service learning programs, students with disabilities work alongside their peers without disabilities to complete service projects. They may participate in service learning as part of an inclusive class in which they are enrolled (see Gent & Gurecka, 1998; Yoder & Retish, 1994) or as part of an extracurricular school club (see Kleinert et al., 2004). While the instructional goals and type of participation may vary among students, inclusive programs focus on group effort and include all students in planning, implementing, and evaluating the project (Brill, 1994; Gent & Gurecka; Kleinert et al.).

Conceptualizing service learning within an inclusive paradigm appears to be an emerging trend within the field of secondary special education. This is not surprising given the continued movement within the field toward inclusive education and the increasing emphasis placed on access to the general curriculum (Dymond & Orelowe, 2001; IDEIA, 2004). Gent and Gurecka (1998) provide a particularly compelling justification for inclusive service learning. They argue that such programs meet the needs of all students because they easily blend academic and functional skills, and promote critical thinking. As a result, it is possible for students with very diverse abilities to actively participate in meaningful ways. For students with disabilities who need community-based instruction, service learning allows them to receive such instruction with their same-age peers within a meaningful context. Furthermore, performing service activities alongside peers without disabilities in the community enables students with disabilities to be seen as competent, equally contributing members of society.

Methods for including students with disabilities in inclusive high school service learning programs (HSSLPs) are not clearly defined or understood. In our review of the ERIC, PsychInfo, and National Service Learning Clearinghouse databases from 1990-2005, we found eight peer reviewed articles that addressed inclusive HSSLPs, only two of which reported empirical data. Although none of these articles specifically investigated methods for including students with disabilities, they do provide some direction for practitioners regarding promising practices. Methods for including students in inclusive HSSLPs consist of matching students’ skills with service activities that they are capable of successfully completing (Yoder & Retish, 1994), pairing students with and without disabilities to carry out projects (Gent & Gurecka, 1998; Kleinert et al., 2004; Yoder & Retish), actively engaging students with disabilities in planning service projects (Kleinert et al.), modifying materials (Gent & Gurecka), and having students with disabilities teach students without disabilities how to perform tasks (Brill, 1994). In inclusive HSSLPs, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and objectives for students with disabilities should be linked to the service learning experiences (Brill; Gent & Gurecka; Kleinert et al.). This enables students to pur-
sue the general curriculum as well as individualized goals.

Barriers to including students with disabilities in inclusive HSSLPs were visibly absent from the literature. Yoder and Retish (1994) identified lack of time for engaging in service learning as one barrier. Students engaged in service learning expressed interest in volunteering for longer periods of time or on a more frequent basis than was possible. Given the relatively few articles addressing inclusive HSSLPs, it is surprising that little information is known about the barriers schools face in including students with disabilities.

Inclusive service learning appears to be a promising practice for assisting students with disabilities to access the general curriculum and address other important curriculum goals. It also incorporates a number of tenants of effective practices for educating students with disabilities. In order to understand how inclusive service learning is an effective pedagogy at the secondary level, more information is needed about the methods for and barriers to including students with disabilities. Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of stakeholders from inclusive HSSLPs about effective methods for including students with disabilities and barriers that limit or prevent their participation.

Method

One focus group was conducted with adult stakeholders in each of five inclusive HSSLPs in the state of Illinois. An “inclusive service learning program” was defined as one in which students with and without disabilities participated alongside each other to complete a service learning project. Students with disabilities were the providers of service, not the recipients or beneficiaries of the service.

Participants

A combination of criterion and snowball sampling procedures (Patton, 2002) were employed to select five Illinois high schools for participation. Criterion sampling allowed the selection of schools that met a pre-determined criterion of excellence while snowball sampling narrowed the number of schools to the most information rich cases. Exemplary schools were initially identified as those receiving distinction within the last five years as a National Service Learning Leader School and/or a Prairie State Service Learning Leader School. The former designation involves national recognition by the Corporation for National and Community Service (http://www.leaderschools.org/) and the latter involves recognition by the Illinois State Board of Education (http://www.isbe.net/learnserve/). Sixteen schools met this criterion. Officials from the Illinois Learn and Serve program, service learning coordinators from high school Leader Schools, and administrators from regional superintendents’ offices were also contacted by telephone to obtain recommendations of exemplary inclusive HSSLPs. This resulted in the identification of eight schools, four of which were duplicative of the list of leader schools.

To purposefully select a wide range of schools with different experiences, information was gathered from the Interactive Illinois Report Card (http://iirc.niu.edu/) about the geographic location, size, socio-economic status, and ethnicity of the schools. Each of the four schools that were both nominated as exemplary and identified as a leader school proved to be different along these dimensions and thus were contacted first. Service learning coordinators from the nominated programs were interviewed individually by telephone to obtain more information about the program (participants, inclusion of students with disabilities, courses using service learning, examples of service learning projects, program’s history).

Decisions about the inclusion of schools in the study were made collaboratively by the authors based on findings from the telephone interview. In addition to being identified as exemplary, criteria for inclusion in the study included having at least three years of experience implementing an inclusive service learning program. All four schools nominated as exemplary and recognized as leader schools met the criteria and agreed to participate. Two additional schools found to complement the demographics (i.e., geographic location, size, socio-economic status, and ethnicity) of the selected schools were then contacted for interviews. Although both schools met the criteria for participation, one school lacked suf-
sufficient people to participate due to recent staff turnover, thus the other school was selected. We would have included both schools in the study had each agreed to participate.

The five schools selected for participation served grades nine to 12 and had five to 12 (M = 8.6) years of experience including students with disabilities in service learning. These schools were purposefully diverse with regards to geographic location, school size, socio-economic status, and ethnicity (see Table 1). All of the schools included students with mild disabilities. Three schools included students with moderate disabilities and two included students with severe disabilities. One to two individuals coordinated the service learning program at each school. These coordinators simultaneously assumed other responsibilities at the school including teaching (social studies, foreign language, physical education, special education) or guidance counseling.

One focus group was conducted at each school. Each focus group was composed of adult stakeholders who were knowledgeable about the service learning program and its inclusion of students with disabilities. Views from at least three stakeholder groups (e.g., administrators, service learning coordinators, general education teachers, special education teachers, related services personnel, paraprofessionals, parents, and community members) were included in all of the focus groups. Participants were chosen by the service learning coordinator at each school in consultation with the focus group moderator. Two of the focus groups included parents and/or community members while three were composed exclusively of school personnel. Focus groups ranged in size from three to six participants (M = 5) and all participants received a small monetary stipend for participation in the two-hour interview.

**Data Collection**

The procedures selected for moderating the focus groups adhered to the guidelines provided by Krueger and Casey (2000). One researcher served as the moderator. She asked the pre-identified questions, probed for more information, summarized responses, and ensured all participants had equal opportunity to participate. A second researcher participated as an assistant moderator. She recorded notes on a flip chart and led the post-session

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**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Demographics</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>School D</th>
<th>School E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>1,984</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>2,193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent with disabilities&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average class size</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher to student ratio across the school district</td>
<td>1:13</td>
<td>1:16</td>
<td>1:21</td>
<td>1:19</td>
<td>1:19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent low income</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic location</td>
<td>rural</td>
<td>rural</td>
<td>suburban</td>
<td>urban</td>
<td>suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent by ethnicity</td>
<td>White 100</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black  0</td>
<td>.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic 0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian 0</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Native American 0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability level of SL participants</td>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>Mild, Moderate,</td>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>Mild, Moderate,</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate,</td>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate,</td>
<td>Severe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. SL = service learning

<sup>a</sup> Includes students with an IEP, 504 plan, and those receiving speech and language services
debriefing following data collection. Although a digital voice recorder was utilized to record each session, the flipchart notes allowed participants to see the ideas that had been generated previously and enabled the moderator to summarize the group’s responses prior to moving on to the next question.

Each focus group was held at the participants’ school in a room that was free from distractions. The moderator began each interview by facilitating participant introductions, clarifying the roles of the moderators and participants, explaining the purpose of the focus group, discussing confidentiality and how the results would be used, and reviewing the focus group questions. The moderator and assistant moderator convened following each focus group to discuss, clarify, and summarize the main points of the session.

Five structured questions were asked within each focus group interview. The first three questions gathered data on the participants’ service learning program and their beliefs about the key elements of inclusive HSSLPs (see Dymond, Renzaglia, & Chun, 2007). The fourth question requested participants to describe the methods they found most effective for including students with disabilities in service learning. The final question required them to identify what, if any, barriers they experienced in including students with disabilities in service learning. Findings from these last two questions are the basis for this article.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in two stages (Patton, 2002). The first stage involved a qualitative analysis. This method was chosen because it allowed a list of specific methods and barriers to emerge from the data, and the use of inductive analysis to determine categories that cut across schools. The second stage involved determining the number of schools that identified each method and barrier. This analysis was performed to clarify the extent to which the methods and barriers were prevalent across schools.

Coding. The digital recording of each focus group session was transcribed verbatim. Utilizing a content analysis procedure (Patton, 2002), each transcript was read several times in order to develop a list of codes to describe each method for and barrier to including students with disabilities in service learning. Once the codes were finalized, transcripts were re-read and a code was assigned to each method or barrier. A second researcher independently reviewed all coded data to verify the appropriateness of the assigned codes and the consistency used in applying the codes. Where differences of opinion existed, the two researchers discussed the coding until they arrived at agreement. The final codes are listed as methods in Table 2 and barriers in Table 3.

Data reduction. Using an inductive approach, methods across all five schools were examined and grouped into categories. Methods that were similar were included in the same category if they were complementary in meaning and helped to define the category. Each method was assigned to only one category. This process was repeated for the list of barriers. As with the initial coding, a second researcher independently reviewed the codes assigned to each category to confirm their appropriateness. Differences of opinion were discussed between the two researchers until agreement was obtained about the codes included in each category. The final categories are defined in Tables 2 and 3.

Following the qualitative analysis, a frequency count was performed to determine the number of schools that identified each method and barrier. This allowed for comparisons in the magnitude of responses and the level of agreement among schools. All methods and barriers, regardless of the number of participants or schools that identified them, were included in the analysis. We anticipated that the methods and barriers identified by each school might vary due to the nature of the school (i.e., geographic location, size, ethnicity, percent low income, type of students with disabilities served) so we purposefully selected schools that were diverse across these dimensions. The decision to retain all data was made because the primary purpose of the study was to capture the range of practitioner experiences and beliefs about methods and barriers. Deleting ideas mentioned by only one person or school would have diminished our understanding of practices advocated by stakeholders in diverse, inclusive HSSLPs.
TABLE 2
Methods for Including Students with Disabilities in Inclusive HSSLPs (N = 5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th># of Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity selection and structure (n = 5)</td>
<td>Give students choices</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Place students in situations where they will be successful</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choose activities depending on students’ ability level</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Include more hands-on activities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offer a variety of activities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assess students to determine their capabilities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Start with smaller, teacher initiated projects</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration (n = 5)</td>
<td>Collaborate with general and/or special education teachers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obtain support for service learning from all staff involved with students</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide enough staff</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obtain information about students’ abilities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obtain information about methods for ensuring students’ success</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide teachers with information about students’ disabilities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss service learning opportunities during IEP meetings, 504 meetings, or transition meetings</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations (n = 5)</td>
<td>Have the same expectations for students with and without disabilities</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Treat students with disabilities like everyone else</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expect students to participate</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allow students to fail</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement (n = 4)</td>
<td>Allow student ownership of the project</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Get to know the students with disabilities</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ask students how they would like to be involved in service learning</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allow students to have an active role in decision-making</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grouping (n = 4)</td>
<td>Pair students with and without disabilities to complete projects</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Include normal proportions of students with and without disabilities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modifications (n = 3)</td>
<td>Provide additional instruction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide supplementary instruction in the special education classroom</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Modify the rules when needed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Modify grading practices</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. HSSLPs = high school service learning programs; n = number of schools contributing methods to each category

Trustworthiness. Guba and Lincoln (1989) indicated that rigorous qualitative analyses use procedures that support “trustworthiness” of the data. In this study, trustworthiness was ensured by a) analyzing data transcribed verbatim from a high quality digital voice recorder, b) using a two-step process to understand the data, and c) verifying interpretations of the data between two researchers.

Results
Data from this study are organized around: a) methods for including students with disabilities in inclusive HSSLPs and b) barriers to
including students with disabilities in inclusive HSSLPs. Tables 2 and 3 provide a list of the methods and barriers that emerged and the number of schools that identified methods and barriers within each category.

**Methods for Including Students with Disabilities**

Methods clustered within six categories: a) activity selection and structure, b) collaboration, c) expectations, d) encouragement, e) grouping, and f) modifications (see Table 2). Participants provided varying levels of detail regarding the methods they employed. In fact, many initially struggled to identify specific strategies for including students with disabilities. A common remark among participants was that the methods they employed were ones they found to be effective with all students, regardless of whether they had an identified disability.

**Activity selection and structure.** Participants across all five schools emphasized the importance of selecting appropriate service learning activities for students with disabilities. Activities should be selected that are “at their level” and will enable them to be “successful” and “feel safe” with engaging in the project. Two methods were suggested for ensuring student success. One is to informally assess students to determine activities that match students’ strengths and promote active participation. Understanding students’ skills prevents teachers from assigning students to activities that extend beyond their abilities. A second method is to invite students with disabilities to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th># of Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resources (n = 5)</td>
<td>Not enough transportation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of money</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Too much effort required to coordinate the inclusion</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of administrative support</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not enough people/staff</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff turnover</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of proper equipment (e.g., washroom, chairs) in the community</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher attributes and experience (n = 4)</td>
<td>Lack of knowledge about students’ disabilities</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative attitudes toward students with disabilities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low expectations of students with disabilities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of experience with students with disabilities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need for staff development and training</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers don’t have the patience to work with students with disabilities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational structure (n = 4)</td>
<td>Schedules of students with disabilities are not flexible</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students with disabilities have a shortened school day</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Too many students with disabilities in service learning classes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students with disabilities need to be more visible in the school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning (n = 3)</td>
<td>Lack of communication among staff about students with disabilities</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not enough time to co-plan</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student characteristics (n = 2)</td>
<td>Students with disabilities are afraid of participating in the service activities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** HSSLPs = high school service learning programs; n = number of schools contributing methods to each category
participate in service learning projects initiated and planned by the teacher. As students with disabilities become more comfortable, they can be encouraged to design their own service learning projects.

Participants also spoke about methods for structuring activities to promote the participation of students with diverse abilities. Providing “choices” and “options” was viewed as a key method for encouraging reluctant students to participate and creating student ownership for the service project. Other methods include offering a variety of tasks and incorporating hands-on activities. The more hands-on the activity and the more choices and types of tasks available, the more likely all students will be able to participate in some component of the activity. As one participant commented, when activities are structured this way, “their disabilities aren’t so noticeable.”

**Collaboration.** All five schools deemed collaboration essential. Discussions across focus groups focused primarily on collaboration among school personnel. To effectively include students with disabilities, general and special education teachers need to meet regularly, collaborate to develop curriculum, share information about each student’s strengths and needs, and provide support to each other. In one school, the special education teacher provided general education teachers with a list of the strengths and weaknesses of each student included in his/her class. This information helps the general educator understand the student’s disability, adaptation requirements, and instructional support needs. Participants at another school discussed student participation in service learning more formally during IEP, transition, and/or 504 plan meetings. During these meetings, the student and his/her team review service learning requirements, determine how the student might benefit from this form of instruction, and identify the supports and accommodations necessary for participation.

Teaching assistants and other support staff are considered essential collaborators in programs that include students with severe disabilities or a large number of students with mild disabilities. These individuals provide instruction to students and help those with wheelchairs move to various locations during activities. One participant noted that there needs to be “support staff specifically geared towards those students” because they need more “one-on-one and hands-on” than other students. Another commented that having sufficient staff “facilitates the inclusion.” In addition to working directly with students with disabilities, participants recommended including support staff in meetings pertaining to student participation in service learning.

Collaboration was also defined as having support from the school faculty for the program. As one participant noted, “I think that you gotta have all the teachers involved and buy into it for it to work.” At another school, faculty buy-in was viewed as having teachers at the school who were flexible about letting students out of classes to participate in service learning. Even though those teachers were not leading the service learning activity as part of their class, they allowed students to participate in service learning as long as they made up the work they missed and maintained good grades.

**Expectations.** Participants’ expectations for students with disabilities were uniformly high across all schools. Those who spoke about expectations were adamant that teachers have the same expectations for students with and without disabilities, and treat students with disabilities the same way they treat students without disabilities. For one participant, providing equal treatment included allowing students to fail. “Everybody fails at something and a person with a disability has the right to fail just as much as the next person.” Although other participants did not echo this position, it demonstrates the extent to which this individual viewed the importance of providing equitable experiences for all children.

A few participants felt they treated students with disabilities differently from their non-disabled peers. For example, one participant admitted:

I think subconsciously, I’m gonna make it consciously, even a lot of time, we tend to treat those kids a little differently. I don’t know that it has anything to do with service learning, but I think sometimes we may tend to accept some of their behaviors a little more readily for them than we might from some other kids.
Another participant commented that she wasn’t always sure about students’ capabilities and would feel bad if her expectations were too low. Although these types of comments were voiced somewhat reluctantly, they underscore the issue inherent in determining appropriate expectations for students with disabilities.

Two rationales for having high expectations were provided. One rationale emphasized the impact high expectations have on students without disabilities. When teachers have high expectations for students with disabilities and treat them like all other students, students without disabilities are more likely to interact with and accept students with disabilities as equal members of the class. The other, more common, rationale voiced suggests that service learning activities do not limit the participation of any student and, thus, should not impact the expectations one has for students with disabilities. One participant summed this point up succinctly. “There’s no distinction if a kid has a disability or not. It (service learning) crosses every barrier there is. I don’t care what your limitation to learning is.” Another participant was emphatic in denying the need for students with disabilities to have special treatment. She stated, “The LD kids, it’s like, I ain’t given you a break cuz you have a learning disability. Just go and do it. What’s the problem?”

Across schools, participants’ focused on an expectation for active participation in activities. Because choices are available within activities, students are able to self-select out of completing tasks that are difficult for them or accentuate their weaknesses. For example, if a student experiences difficulty with writing, he would likely choose a different part of the service learning activity to complete that allows him to use his strengths. High expectations for participation were not necessarily tied to high expectations to perform at grade level in content area subjects.

Encouragement. Participants across four of the schools agreed that it is important for teachers to encourage students with disabilities to participate in service learning activities. They do this by “asking” students to participate, inquiring how they would like to be involved, and negotiating the role they want to assume. One participant explained it this way: We just need to encourage them more. I think some of the kids with needs or disabilities sometimes sit back and don’t want to be involved because they don’t think they can or they don’t think they should, and they don’t want anybody to know.

In three of the schools, participants advocated spending time getting to know students in order to make them feel comfortable with the teacher, the other students, and the activities. Teacher encouragement was viewed as a method to help build students’ confidence.

In addition to encouraging students to participate, students with disabilities also need to be encouraged to assume an active role in decision-making. One service learning coordinator was adamant about demanding student involvement as evidenced by this statement:

Involve the kids from the get go. Ask their opinions. Seek them out. Ask them. If one thing is repeated more and more than anything else over the last ten years to me is they always say how do you get all these kids to do all these things? And the simple answer is you ask them. Seriously, if you stop and think about it, almost anybody would do anything for you.

When students are encouraged to provide input into the design of the activities, they gain increased ownership for the project and its success. As one participant noted, without this type of ownership, “the service is not going to fly.”

Grouping. Participants at four of the schools described strong rationales and strategies for pairing students with and without disabilities to perform service learning. When thinking about the benefits of diverse grouping, one participant commented, “We had a strength here, and a strength here, and a strength here. As a group they’ll work together, but if individually, they had to do all three (tasks), they’d struggle.” Teachers group students so that each person can contribute a different, yet complementary, strength to the group’s project.

Some participants carefully pair students to work together and some allow partners to emerge on their own. At one school, students with disabilities are paired with individuals
who are “more experienced” in service learning than the student with a disability. Experienced students were described as individuals who are “more mature” or “advanced” (e.g., a student taking Advanced Placement courses). In another school, students with disabilities are paired with students who can serve as “role models.” For example, students with behavior problems are often paired with students who do not have behavior problems.

An alternative strategy to grouping is to have students select their own partners. Participants at one school indicated they do not purposefully group students. They believe that having students work with partners is important and that students need to choose their own partners. When partners do not work well together, the adults ask another student to “help out.” They do not force students to work together. Students always have choice about their partners. In order for this strategy to work, teachers need to be observant and sensitive to student interactions, and be prepared to “step in” when problems arise.

Although participants elaborated on strategies for grouping students with and without disabilities to work together, they also stated that the class as a whole (i.e., the large group) needs to include a normal proportion of students with disabilities. Over-representation of students with disabilities inhibits the effectiveness of the teacher and the ability of all students to adequately learn and participate. If controls are not put on the number of students with disabilities enrolled, it is easy for these classes to become a “dumping ground.”

Modifications. Modifications that facilitate inclusion of students with disabilities in service learning include providing additional instruction, monitoring students with disabilities more frequently than students without disabilities, providing supplementary instruction in the special education classroom (e.g., pre-teaching behavior expectations, providing consequences for misbehavior in the community), and modifying the rules and grading practices. Instructional modifications were only discussed within three schools and no participants provided specific examples (beyond those listed above) of the types of modifications they employ.

Barriers to Including Students with Disabilities

Five categories of barriers emerged. These categories include a) resources, b) teacher attributes and experience, c) organizational structure, d) planning, and e) student characteristics (see Table 3). Although all five schools contributed to the list of barriers, participants at two of the schools indicated that no barriers currently exist to including students with disabilities in service learning. They admitted that barriers might exist if they were asked to serve more students with disabilities, or students with more severe disabilities or behavior problems.

Resources. Participants across all five schools identified resources that were needed to improve the inclusion of students with disabilities. The two primary resource barriers cited were money and transportation. Limited funding for materials needed to complete projects can curtail the number and type of service learning projects available. Funding is also needed for specialized buses to accommodate students who use wheelchairs. Since these students cannot ride the regular school bus, there is an increased cost for an extra bus each time a student with a wheelchair performs service in the community. Lack of transportation for service learning activities that occur after school or on weekends was also cited as a barrier.

One school experienced difficulty finding appropriate equipment in the community. Students with disabilities need accessible washrooms and specialized chairs that may not be available in all community settings. This impacts students’ access to some service learning activities.

Staffing was viewed as another barrier to including students with disabilities. At one school participants commented that students with disabilities would be more successful if the staff had more time to work with them. There needs to be a peer mentor, another service learning student, or a staff person available to provide support when needed. At another school, staff turnover was viewed as a barrier to maintaining the program in general. Position cuts at the school eliminated many teachers who had been implementing service learning within their curriculum. Although pockets of people exist to champion
the program, time is needed to attract and train new teachers to incorporate service learning in their courses.

A concern was articulated about the amount of effort required to coordinate service learning programs and the impact that adding students with disabilities might have on a program. It could be very overwhelming to a service learning coordinator if he or she was expected to include all students with disabilities at once, particularly if that program had not included those students previously. Additional staff support would be necessary to include large numbers of students with disabilities, particularly if the students have severe disabilities.

Finally, lack of administrative support was viewed as problematic (either currently or in the past). Some felt that the administration was not supportive of service learning in general and had difficulty seeing how it “fit” with the general curriculum and overall academic program. This barrier was not specific to including students with disabilities. Others thought their administration was not knowledgeable about the needs of students with disabilities and offered minimal support to advance their participation in the community.

Teacher attributes and experience. Participants from four schools viewed their own lack of knowledge and experience with students with disabilities as a potential barrier to including students with disabilities. Teachers and community members need more information about students’ disabilities, the “problems” associated with the disability, and how to adapt the curriculum to meet student needs. All school faculty need to become more competent in working with students with disabilities.

In addition to lack of training, another barrier is the negative attitudes toward students with disabilities possessed by some adults. At one school, where students with severe disabilities are just beginning to participate in service learning projects, a participant noted, “I don’t think people know what to expect of students who have more moderate to severe disabilities. I think there’s fear out there.” At other schools, participants admitted that some teachers have low expectations for students with disabilities and lack the patience needed to work with them. One general educator/service learning coordinator eloquently commented on the attitude he aspired all teachers to embrace.

It’s a person with a disability. It’s not a disability on a person. We need to think beyond what we think they may or may not be capable of. We don’t allow those barriers to be put in front of the child without a disability.

This participant stressed the need for more adults to “think outside the box” when determining how to include students with disabilities.

Organizational structure. Three barriers emerged related to the organizational structure of the school. First, the schedules of students with disabilities prevent or limit their participation in service learning. Some students are on a shortened school day or leave early to go to work. Others participate in community-based instruction at times that overlap with service learning activities.

Second, classes that offer service learning need to be monitored so they do not become a “dumping ground” for students with disabilities. Over-representation of students with disabilities makes the classroom dynamics difficult to manage. Participants suggested putting a “cap” on the number of students with disabilities in each class so that all students are able to sufficiently benefit from service learning.

Third, students with disabilities need to be more visible throughout the school building and “more integrated into the population.” When students with disabilities are served primarily through self-contained special education classrooms, it is important for their classrooms to be integrated into the general classroom areas rather than placed in a separate part of the building. These students also need to be served in more general education classes in order to facilitate their inclusion in the service learning program and the school.

Planning. Four schools identified planning as a barrier to including students with disabilities. Insufficient time exists for staff to discuss the needs of students with disabilities, collaboratively plan activities, or coordinate activities and staff efforts across the school. For example, several participants voiced con-
cern that they were not always aware of which students in their classes had disabilities. One participant noted, “When I get some of these kids, I don’t know what is wrong. I don’t know that there’s a problem. I don’t know anything about these kids.” Communication breaks down and teachers are not informed of students’ disabilities, IEP objectives, and accommodation needs. In addition, some participants were not sure if all students with disabilities at their school participated in service learning. This was particularly true when the school housed full-time self-contained classrooms.

**Student characteristics.** Some students with disabilities have low self-esteem and do not want to be placed in a situation where they face potential embarrassment. They lack confidence in their abilities and are fearful of participating in service activities. Participants viewed student characteristics as a barrier at two of the schools. They also acknowledged that the self-esteem and confidence issues faced by students with disabilities are also prevalent among some students without disabilities. These student characteristics, more than the presence of disability, negatively impact students’ willingness and ability to participate in service learning.

**Discussion**

Findings from this study provide a preliminary examination of the methods for and barriers to including students with disabilities in HSSLPs alongside their peers without disabilities. Methods emerged in the categories of activity selection and structure, collaboration, expectations, encouragement, grouping, and modifications. Barriers clustered around the categories of resources, teacher attributes and experience, organizational structure, planning, and student characteristics. These methods and barriers support and expand on those identified previously in the literature on inclusive HSSLPs.

There are several limitations that should be acknowledged prior to discussing the findings. First, we did not observe the service learning programs at each school, therefore it is unclear the extent to which the methods and barriers identified by each school were actually present. Second, since stakeholders from five schools generated the data for this study, it is possible that the findings are not representative of the range of methods and barriers experienced by all inclusive HSSLPs. Third, school stakeholders (i.e., general educators, special educators, paraprofessionals, principals) were the dominant group present within the focus groups. Additional methods and barriers might have been identified if representation from parents and community members was higher within each focus group. Fourth, the data do not take into consideration the perspectives of students with and without disabilities. Their views may be very different than those of adults. Finally, a limitation of the focus group methodology is that it did not allow participants across schools to interact and comment on the methods and barriers identified by each school. As a result, the number of schools indicating each method and barrier (as reflected in Tables 2 and 3) may underestimate the actual number of schools where the methods and barriers were present.

**A Philosophy of Inclusion: The Unspoken Method**

Within each school there appeared to be an overall shared commitment for inclusive service learning. Each stakeholder, regardless of his or her role, conveyed the importance of including students with disabilities in service learning and spoke positively about his or her experiences. At each school, there was never an instance of service learning being championed by only a single person. Nor was inclusion an idea that was “owned” or “advocated” exclusively by the special education staff. Participants were united in their belief that all students, regardless of ability, could and should participate in service learning.

While no one specifically discussed the importance of having a philosophy of inclusion, one must wonder whether an unspoken and unacknowledged method for including students with disabilities in service learning is the presence of a group that philosophically supports inclusive education. Participants across schools were able to identify barriers that limit the inclusion of students with disabilities in service learning, but they also spoke openly about changes they would like to see to improve the overall inclusion of students with
disabilities at their school. For example, some participants felt the classrooms for students with disabilities should be located alongside other general education classrooms rather than in a non-classroom wing of the building. Others indicated that students with disabilities should be included in more general education classes. They stated that improving the visibility and inclusion of students with disabilities across the school day would enhance their inclusion in service learning projects because students and teachers would “already know them.”

Barriers to Inclusion or Inclusive Service Learning?

Barriers to inclusive service learning identified by the participants are consistent, in many ways, with barriers to inclusive education cited in the literature. Issues related to resources, staff knowledge and expertise, planning time, and program organization and logistics are widely acknowledged as constraints on the implementation of effective inclusive education (Janney, Snell, Beers, & Raynes, 1995; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Pearman, Huang, & Mellblom, 1997; Pivik, McComas, & Laflamme, 2002; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Werts, Wolery, Snyder, & Caldwell, 1996). Although two schools indicated that no barriers currently existed to including students with disabilities in service learning, participants were quick to point out that adding more students with disabilities or students with more severe disabilities or behavior problems could be problematic unless additional resources and training were available. They were able to envision events (e.g., reduced funding, changes in administration, teacher attrition) that could create barriers to including students with disabilities in the future.

Given the similarity between barriers identified in this study and those cited in the inclusive education literature, it seems plausible to infer that the barriers may be more characteristic of an inclusive practice as opposed to a phenomena specific to inclusive service learning. We suggest that it is not the educational pedagogy of service learning, per se, that causes or creates the barriers. It is the difficulty with implementing the practice of inclusive education (that transcends curriculum and pedagogy) that creates the barrier. Methods for overcoming barriers to inclusive education may well prove effective in addressing some of the barriers encountered by inclusive HSSLPs. It remains unclear which barriers, if any, are specific to inclusive service learning.

The Goal: Participation vs. Skill Acquisition?

For the schools in this study, inclusion was defined almost synonymously with participation. Implicit in this definition, as articulated through numerous examples, was an emphasis on active engagement and ensuring that all students made a contribution to the service project. Whether the student completed a task in whole or in part, with help or not, did not diminish the value of the participation. In fact, partial participation and collaboration with peers was clearly valued, as evidenced by the many descriptions provided of how teachers grouped students with and without disabilities to complete projects. Participation was a key term reiterated across schools and throughout each interview.

We found the emphasis placed on students’ active participation to be both refreshing and noteworthy. At the same time, we questioned whether the methods discussed for including students with disabilities extended appropriately far enough to ensure their access to the general curriculum and attention to individualized IEP objectives. In previous discussions with the participants (see Dymond et al., 2007), we found strong support for connecting service learning to the curriculum. Participants were adamant that inclusive HSSLPs should link to both the academic curriculum and to a functional life skills curriculum. We were, therefore, intrigued when these same participants failed to mention the connection between service learning and the curriculum as a method for including students with disabilities. Only one school’s participants suggested talking about service learning as part of an IEP, 504 plan, or transition plan, but no mention was made of how decisions were made about the curriculum to be addressed through service learning.

Across focus groups, stakeholders discussed the importance of allowing students to choose activities and to select activities that matched their skills. Yet, it seemed that the focus of the
service learning activity for students with disabilities was more highly focused on participation than it was on learning new skills. Students were channeled into activities that matched their skills and preferences rather than working on new skills or applying emerging skills. If students perceived an activity as too difficult, they were allowed to self-select out of the activity and choose a different one. The role of the teacher in directing student learning and teaching new skills was visibly absent from the list of methods for including students with disabilities. One might argue that this is appropriate since an important component of service learning is student participation in designing service projects. In our opinion, if service learning is to be linked to the curriculum, there needs to be a careful balance between allowing students to assume ownership and responsibility for projects and teacher oversight regarding the acquisition and application of new skills. Connections need to be made that illustrate not only that students with disabilities can be successfully included (i.e., participate), but that they can also achieve and learn as a result. It was not clear from the focus groups whether the intent of service learning for students with disabilities was to assist them in learning and practicing new skills, or whether it was to allow them to apply skills they had already mastered to new situations. We believe there should be a balance.

Are High Expectations Enough?

A truly admirable trait of participants was the emphasis they placed on having high expectations for students with disabilities. They considered students with disabilities capable. In addition, they believed that the structure of service learning activities (e.g., hands-on learning, activity-based projects, student choice, variety of tasks) was what allowed students with very diverse abilities to participate. Service learning, as a form of pedagogy, eliminated potential barriers to including students with disabilities, thus increasing teachers’ expectations for students to be successful.

In essence, participants viewed service learning as a form of universal design for learning (UDL). The premise of UDL is that the curriculum should be designed with the needs of all students in mind from the start. If the curriculum is designed appropriately, the need for modifications and adaptations should be greatly diminished or non-existent (CEC, 1998; Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002). In the present study, many participants initially expressed difficulty with identifying methods for including students with disabilities in service learning. They indicated that the methods they used were no different than the ones they used with students without disabilities. Some even stated that service learning was “the method” for including students with disabilities alongside their peers. Perhaps the service learning experiences at these schools embodied the principles of UDL such that specialized adaptations and modifications were rarely necessary.

Although numerous methods for including students with disabilities in service learning were ultimately identified, we were surprised to find limited mention of teaching methods. It is the absence of these methods that brings to question whether the expectations participants had for students with disabilities were sufficiently high. That is, did the participants have adequate knowledge and expertise in working with students with disabilities to clearly identify reasonable goals and effective teaching strategies for helping students learn? The nature of service learning may indeed make it a UDL strategy, but UDL does not preclude the need for teaching. UDL should make the curriculum accessible. An accessible curriculum is not equivalent to an easier or less demanding curriculum (CEC, 1998; Orkwis, 1999; Rose & Meyer, 2000).

Participants themselves seemed unclear about how their expectations for students with disabilities could or should be any different than they would be for students without disabilities. While they expressed support for holding students with disabilities to the same high standards as students without disabilities, they were not always sure what was reasonable or what the students were truly capable of accomplishing. This was evident by some of the barriers they identified, including lack of knowledge about students’ disabilities and accommodation requirements, a need for more experience and training in working with students with disabilities, and a desire for better communication and collaboration between
general and special educators. If information about the needs of students with disabilities is not regularly shared and discussed, it becomes less surprising that strategies for teaching students with disabilities failed to emerge strongly in our list of methods.

Implications for Research and Practice

The methods and barriers identified by participants in this study offer practical direction for high school personnel seeking to include students with disabilities in service learning. Their words and examples offer insights that can only be gained from their experiences with implementing an inclusive program. Based on the collective findings across schools, we believe there are several points that warrant additional consideration by school and community stakeholders.

- An inclusive HSSLP is bound together by a group of adult stakeholders from diverse disciplines that embody a philosophy of inclusion. The philosophy of this group needs to extend beyond the day-to-day operation of the service learning program to include goals toward increasing the overall inclusiveness of the school itself. The presence of an inclusive school philosophy will support and enhance implementation of an inclusive HSSLP.
- All students, regardless of their ability, are capable of participating in service learning. “Participation” is important and each student with a disability needs to be actively engaged, at his or her own level, to the extent they are capable.
- There is a need to move beyond defining inclusion as participation. Teachers and other adults who support students in learning need to create a balance between allowing students to apply skills they have already mastered and assisting them to learn new skills and practice emerging ones. Although service learning can be conceptualized as a UDL strategy, it does not preclude the need for specialized instructional strategies.
- Greater attention needs to be devoted to ensuring that methods for including students with disabilities in service learning take into consideration the curriculum needs of the students. IEP objectives should be infused into service learning projects where appropriate.
- In light of IDEIA (2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) measurable data must be gathered on the performance outcomes of students with and without disabilities who participate in service learning. These outcomes need to address curriculum linked to the state standards as well as performance on IEP objectives that address other curriculum areas such as life skills.
- School and community members need additional training in how to teach students with disabilities. They need to be informed of the unique needs of the students with disabilities for whom they are responsible. Time for teachers to collaborate and share information is essential to consistently meet the needs of students with disabilities across high school classes.

Additional research on inclusive HSSLPs should focus on validating the methods and barriers identified through this study. This information could provide useful information about the extent to which the findings from this study are representative of other inclusive HSSLPs and may help to extend the list of methods and barriers identified. Research should also seek to identify effective methods for overcoming barriers that prevent or limit the participation of students with disabilities in HSSLPs.

A more thorough examination of the methods used to include students with disabilities in HSSLPs is also needed. Observations of inclusive HSSLPs should be conducted to determine the extent to which the practices advocated by schools are present and result in desired student outcomes. The impact of students’ disability level (i.e., mild, moderate, severe), teacher to student ratio, general education teacher experience in working with students with disabilities, and role of the special education teacher should also be investigated in relationship to methods employed. Finally, we believe there is a need to define effective methods for linking the general curriculum and IEP to service learning activities. Additional work is needed to investigate how students with disabilities can address challenging curriculum content within HSSLPs and the
sponsors school personnel need to help students reach their potential.

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