A local newspaper recently included the following article:

“Sophomore students from the high school Child Development class recently held a ‘Cinco de Mayo’ party for youngsters who attend the New Hope Preschool. All youngsters attending the New Hope Preschool are stricken with blue eyes and, as a result, sometimes have difficulties performing life’s basic skills. The party was conceived by high school child development teacher Rachael Doe. ‘Blue-eyed people are cheated out of the basic things in life such as having a good time. Having blue eyes should not mean that these children have to suffer,’ she said. The idea for a party came up in the Child Development class where Ms. Doe was discussing congenital disorders. Students noted that it would be difficult to be a child with blue eyes and decided to do something to help. The students used class time to learn about blue eyes and their causes. They also researched appropriate activities for preschoolers with blue eyes. Students then canvassed various business and civic groups for donations and also held two in-school bake sales to raise funds for the party. ‘The students learned so much from this service-learning project. Not only did they learn about the effects of blue eyes, they also learned how to motivate a community to help children with this disorder and demonstrated some awesome leadership and organizational skills,’ exuded Ms. Doe. The youngsters, teachers, and families from New Hope Preschool were so pleased by the party that they asked if the high school students could do it again next year. Jane Smith, the administrator at New Hope Preschool, said ‘This party was something different for our youngsters. The high school students are special people — they recognized that our kids are special and did something nice to help them.’”

Reread the article, changing the phrase “blue eyes” to Down syndrome or autism or any other disabling condition. The meaning of the article becomes clear. While it seems silly to provide a party for a group of youngsters with blue eyes, it seems perfectly reasonable, indeed acceptable, to do so for a group of children or adults identified as disabled.

Articles such as these are common in newspapers, newsletters, and television news clips. While the intent of these stories is to publicize the efforts of schools and universities to meet community needs through service-learning, individuals with disabilities are often portrayed in a stereotypical manner. It is ironic that as a field we are sensitive to the cries of racism or sexism in service-learning (Gent, 2001), but seem to ignore the disablism inherent in this work. Disablism is a set of assumptions and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities (Beirne-Smith, Ittenbach, & Patton, 1998).

Service-learning, where students without disabilities provide service to those with disabilities, can reinforce common stereotypes and promote further disablism. People with disabilities are handicapped more often by societal attitudes than they are by their disabilities and, as a result, have been marginalized (Blaska, 1993; Fine & Asch, 1988; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Hanna & Rogovsky, 1991). They continue to endure many injustices, ranging from inaccessible buildings, to being excluded from campus-wide emergency evacuation plans (Axis, 2000), to outright discrimination. Projects that only emphasize giving do little to change these injustices or to remove barriers that keep people with disabilities on the margins of society. Consequent-ly, service-learning can become a disservice for individuals with disabilities. This paper examines how service-learning
may reinforce prevalent images of people with disabilities and provides recommendations on how to conduct service-learning that serves individuals with disabilities.

People with Disabilities and Service-Learning

Service-learning, “an activity-based, cooperative strategy that combines hands-on service and learning in cross-curricular thematic units” (Gent & Gurecka, 1998, p. 261), has four components: learning or preparation, service, reflection, and celebration (Fertman, 1994). Skinner and Chapman (1999) reported that at least a third of all K-12 schools in the U.S. require service-learning and that 90% of all students in grades 6-12 attend schools that encourage students to participate in some type of volunteerism, community service, or service-learning activity.

Regrettably, students with disabilities often do not partake in service-learning activities. Instead, they are most often recipients of service (Brill, 1994; Burns, Storey, & Certo, 1999; Fitzsimons-Lovett, 1998; Gent & Gurecka, 1998; Newman & Rutter, 1986). For instance, examples of service-learning culled from the literature include students without disabilities who: volunteer for the Special Olympics (Andrus, 1996; MacNichol, 1993), participate in a therapeutic horse riding program (Anderson & Guest, 1994), support Circles of Friends, a program for people with disabilities (Cairn & Cairn, 1999); collect clothes and household items for people with disabilities (Hope, 1999); hold “special proms,” read to individuals who are blind, visit people in institutions; and purchase special equipment and raise funds for a variety of disabling conditions (Cairn & Kielsmeier, 1991).

Service-learning efforts in which some of the people with disabilities are the recipients of service are encouraged by service-learning literature that discusses “compassion for the less fortunate [including people with disabilities]” (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996, p. 595). Developing compassion for “the less fortunate” is intended to counter “the narcissism that is believed to be so prevalent among young people and in society” (p. 595). Indeed, students who serve “the less fortunate” often report that their experiences made them feel good about themselves (Miller & Neese, 1997; Morton, 1995; Serow, 1991). Increasing self-esteem for one group of people, however, through a method that devalues another group is counterproductive. Schwartz (1997) termed the phenomenon by which an attempt to help results in unintended opposite effects “paradoxical counterproductivity” (p. 28). Cruz (1989) acknowledged this counterproductivity by noting that service-learning can have discriminatory or prejudicial outcomes despite our best intentions.

Common Images Associated with People with Disabilities

Teachers do not deliberately set out to design service-learning so that students learn to devalue people with disabilities; teachers are products of their culture. Most teachers grow up in segregated environments providing little opportunity to interact with people with disabilities. The problems of segregation are compounded by continued exposure to the media that inaccurately or stereotypically portray people with disabilities as child-like, as people who are broken or need to be fixed, as suffering victims of their disabilities, or as people having extremely poor quality of life. Indeed, Catlett and Martin (1992) found that only 7.2% of 227 newspaper articles they reviewed concerning individuals with disabilities provided realistic and even-handed representations of people with disabilities. Some of the more common stereotypes or images of people with disabilities are briefly explored in the following sections.

Child-Like

A very common stereotype is that individuals with disabilities will remain child-like their entire lives (Kliewer & Drake, 1998). The Walt Disney version of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs exemplifies this stereotype. Dopey, whose name implies some type of cognitive limitation, is portrayed as a child even though he is an adult. Among the dwarfs, he alone has no facial hair; he alone wears clothing many sizes too large; he alone is mute. Further evidence of this stereotype can be found by listening to conversations between people with and without disabilities. When talking to individuals with disabilities, people without disabilities may talk more loudly, more slowly, or with higher pitched, “sing songy” tones otherwise reserved for babies or small children. Additional evidence is revealed by people who refer to individuals with disabilities, regardless of their ages, as boys and girls (Summers, 1986). The perpetual child stereotype brings forth images of individuals who are dependent, passive and helpless; who will need life-long help and support from family and society (Fine & Asch, 1988; Vehmas, 1999); and who are incapable of making their own decisions.

This stereotype may be apparent in service-learning where people without disabilities make decisions concerning people with disabilities that show little or no regard for what the people with disabilities actually want, need, or desire. The people with-
out disabilities assume a paternalistic “father knows best” role in deciding how best to help people with disabilities. This is true not only of service-learning, but also of the fields most often associated with people with disabilities, including special education and rehabilitation (Drake, 1994). Indeed, Drake reported that people with disabilities seldom sit on governing boards, hold positions of power, or otherwise have a voice in agencies that purport to help people with disabilities. Several advocacy organizations founded by people with disabilities, including People First, are currently spearheading efforts to reverse these conditions.

Broken and in Need of Repair

Another common notion is that people with disabilities are broken, defective, deficient, or damaged and therefore need to be fixed (Bogdan & Biklen, 1977; Remen, 1996; Snow, 1998). Indeed, one of the authors of this article was once described in the local newspaper as a special teacher who “helped broken stars regain their twinkle.” Fixing or repairing is rooted in inequality since the fixers (i.e., service providers) have the ability, knowledge, expertise, and skill to fix while — by default — the people being fixed (i.e., service recipients) are unknowledgeable, ignorant, and incompetent (Remen, 1996).

Thus, service-learning that fixes or restores people with disabilities — such as a project to teach people with disabilities how to bank — confers an unequal, subservient status to the recipients of service (Maybach, 1996) and may further devalue individuals with disabilities (Gent & Gurecka, 1998). Unfortunately, when there is a history of dominance of one group over another, it is difficult “not to deliver a message of superiority” (Cruz, 1989, p. 15).

Victims of the Disability

The image that people with disabilities are innocently and wrongly victimized by their disabilities and deserve our condolences and sympathy is pervasive (Morris, 1991). To this end, when Harris (1991) conducted a poll that surveyed 1257 people without disabilities, 74% reported feeling sorry for people with disabilities. The attempt to eradicate these sympathetic or pitiful attitudes toward people with disabilities is often accomplished by performing acts of charity (Morris, 1991). Charity is “the provision of help or relief to those in need. It consists of an individual or an institution acting voluntarily to transfer some of its resources...to an individual or group that has fewer resources” (Marullo & Edwards, 2000, p. 899).

The charity orientation to service-learning is problematic (Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Charity separates “‘the deserving’ from the ‘undeserving’” (Drake, 1994, p. 461) and thereby establishes an inequality. Charity, however, does little to remedy the root of the inequalities. Why does Jane Smith — the administrator at New Hope Preschool in the introductory news clip — view parties as “something different” for children with disabilities? Why cannot someone who has a disability get to the doctor? Why is it that money must be raised for an electric wheelchair? Additionally, the success of the charity approach depends on representing the recipients of charity as truly deserving. For instance, Cairn and Kielsmeier (1991) suggested holding a fundraiser for people with disabilities or a specific disabling condition. But in doing so, individuals with disabilities must be represented as pitiable victims who need our help (Bogdan & Biklen, 1977; Corbett, Jones, & Ralph, 1993; Wang, 1992). After all, who would contribute money to a ‘regular’ person? Rogers (1987) concluded these fund-raising campaigns hold people with disabilities hostage under a “tyranny of goodwill” (p. 120). In order to demonstrate that the people with disabilities are worthy of charity, these campaigns must focus almost exclusively on the disability; they must portray people with disabilities as disabled first, and people second (Snow, 1998; Wang, 1992). In turn, they marginalize people with disabilities from society (Catlett & Martin, 1992; Maybach, 1996) and reinforce the victim stereotype.

Poor Quality of Life

Another stereotype stems from the belief that people with disabilities have an extremely poor quality of life. Because of the disabilities, it is assumed, their lives are not normal (Drake, 1994), unsatisfactory (Vehmas, 1999), limited, difficult to enjoy (Smith, 1995), and full of immeasurable suffering (Wang, 1992). This belief was espoused in the extreme by bioethicist Peter Singer (1995) who argued that people with disabilities have such poor quality lives that they should be euthanized.”[W]hy force them to suffer any more?” (Rogers, 1987, p. 120).

This stereotype may surface in service-learning as efforts ‘to improve the quality of life’ for people with disabilities. We may provide parties, gifts, special activities, etc. in an attempt to help people with disabilities improve their quality of life. The more we provide activities, gifts, and special events to people with disabilities, however, the more we promote the assumption that poor quality of life is an inherent feature of a disability, and the more credence is granted to Singer’s position (Owen, 1999).
Recommendations

Given the pervasiveness of these stereotypes, it is understandable why teachers and students develop service-learning initiatives where people with disabilities are the recipients of service. Believing that people with disabilities should be the recipients of service, they see providing service as beneficial. But it is never enough to ‘do the right thing,’ even with the best intentions, if the net result is that we demean people (Illich, 1968/1990). ‘Doing the right thing’ in a way that does not demean or devalue people with disabilities requires teacher training in disabilities issues, teacher training in service-learning, a sharing orientation to service, and well-structured reflection. A discussion of each follows.

Teacher Training in Disabilities Issues

Teachers must help their students begin to respect, value, and celebrate people with disabilities (Blaska, 1993). In doing so, they must first focus on the people, not the disability (Snow, 1998). “The difference is not denied, but neither does it bring disgrace” (Bogdan & Taylor, 1989). Teachers need to emphasize that all of us require some support at one particular situation, function, or event, but this neediness does not permeate our lives (Fine & Asch, 1988), and that we are all interdependent (Bogdan & Taylor). By seeing individuals with disabilities as people like themselves, as individuals with distinct personalities — distinct likes and dislikes, particular feelings and motives, and unique life histories — students will begin to identify with people with disabilities and see them as human beings instead of pitiable victims. This process, known as individuation, disconfirms stereotypes (Bogdan & Taylor, 1989; Makas, 1993).

Additionally, teachers need to help students understand that people with disabilities “do not necessarily suffer because of their disability. . . In most cases, individuals with . . . disabilities are able to live satisfactory lives” (Vehmas, 1999, p. 120). If there is a lack of quality in the lives of people with disabilities, however, much of it originates from the dearth of appropriate social/attitudinal, institutional, and physical environments. In fact, DeBalcazar, Bradford, and Fawcett (1988) surveyed 13,000 individuals with disabilities and determined that for the most part, individuals with disabilities were satisfied with their lives. They did report, however, anxieties and worries relative to the high cost and lack of availability of basic necessities like wheelchairs; the inaccessibility of public buildings, places of worship, and commercial establishments; employment discrimination; unaffordable, inaccessible housing; and inadequate health care coverage.

Moreover, teachers “must be educated about disability as a civil rights issue, and made aware that many disabled people [sic] reject special treatment on the basis of their disabilities and do not desire to be perceived as different, even if ‘different’ means ‘better’” (Makas, 1988, p. 59). For instance, Drake (1994) noted that people without disabilities campaigned to get things for people with disabilities (e.g., money, equipment, program), while people with disabilities campaigned against things (e.g., discrimination, unequal treatment, segregation). Likewise Makas found that people with and without disabilities defined “positive attitudes” toward people with disabilities in very different ways. Individuals without disabilities defined positive attitudes as “a desire to be nice, helpful” (p. 58) and filling the needs of the people with disabilities. Conversely, individuals with disabilities defined positive attitudes as “either dispensing with the special category of disability entirely, or promoting attitudes that defend the civil and social rights” (p. 58) of people with disabilities. It is understandable, then, why people with disabilities may actually perceive much of the service-learning carried out by people without disabilities as negative, counter-productive, or as doing more harm than good.

Teacher Training in Service-Learning

If teachers use service-learning, then specific teacher training in service-learning must occur. Unfortunately, most teachers of service-learning receive either no formal training (Hope, 1999) or very limited training such as a one-day workshop (Scales, 1999; Skinner & Chapman, 1999). Without specific training, teachers may not understand the shortcomings of the charity orientation to service-learning, may not understand the importance of reflection activities, and may inadvertently reinforce the stereotypes about people with disabilities.

Sharing the Service with People with Disabilities

One of the traditional goals of service-learning is to develop altruism and to allow students to experience the rewards derived from reaching out and giving unselfishly to others (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). Many have argued, however, that the goal of service-learning should be changed from a giving orientation emphasizing charity, to a caring orientation emphasizing relationships with others (Kahne & Westheimer; Koliba, 2000; Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). In caring relationships, “The distance between the one caring and the one cared for diminishes” (Kahne & Westheimer, p. 596).

Carrying this one step further by developing a sharing orientation emphasizes the equal participation of all parties to solve a problem or provide ser-
service to others (Gent & Gurecka, 1998). Sharing is similar to what Maybach (1996) termed partners in service. Sharing the planning and service delivery processes will actually empower people with disabilities (Vehmas, 1999) and will ensure that both groups — the students and the people with disabilities — are equal status players (Gent & Gurecka; Maybach). Sharing also helps to ameliorate two of the negative side effects of service-learning — “the sense of superiority” and the “blame-the-victim mentality” (Marullo & Edwards, 2000, p. 901, 905) that the service providers may experience. Indeed, Burns, Storey, & Certo (1999) noted that when high school students with and without disabilities shared a service-learning project where all students had the same responsibilities to provide service, the attitudes of the students without disabilities toward the students with disabilities became significantly more positive.

The “Standards of Quality for School-Based and Community-Based Service-Learning” (Alliance for Service-Learning on Education Reform [ASLER], 1995) noted that the service experiences should be “coordinated in collaboration with the school and the community” (p. 17). Generally, community agencies are thought to be the most knowledgeable about their clients’ needs (Maybach, 1996). But more important than the collective agency voice is the voice of the individuals. What is meaningful for them (Maybach)? Sharing requires direct communication between individuals, not agencies, so that all parties to get to know and respect each other as people. This disconfirms stereotypes (Makas, 1988) and allows “people to become connected” (Marullo & Edwards, 2000, p. 896) around a common issue or idea (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Unfortunately, people with disabilities may be physically isolated from the rest of the community or feel emotionally secluded and alienated. Thus, specific efforts must be undertaken to reach out to individuals with disabilities and help to reassure them that they will not be seen as needy people, but will instead be valued as equal partners and potential resources.

**On-Going and Well-Structured Reflections**

Another way to reduce disablism in service-learning is to perform quality, well-structured reflection. Reflection is the most critical element of service-learning (ASLER, 1993; Campus Outreach Opportunity League, 1993; Kolb, 1984; McCarthy, 1996; Mintz & Hesser, 1996; Silcox, 1993). It is the “framework in which students process and synthesize the information and ideas they have gained through their service experience...Through the process of reflection, students analyze concepts, evaluate experiences, and form opinions” (ASLER, p. 7). Indeed, Scales (1999) reported the most positive changes in students who had done “a lot of reflection” (p. 40). Unfortunately, reflection is “an underdeveloped aspect of the pedagogy” (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997, p. 153) and the one most often overlooked or omitted. In a study by Scales (1999) of service-learning in middle schools, only 14% of the students surveyed reported spending “a lot” of time on reflection, while 47% of the students surveyed reported little or no reflection time. Likewise, Maybach (1994) reported that only 1% of service-learning in higher education grant projects she reviewed discussed any form of reflection. Additionally, Kleiner and Chapman (1999) reported that less than half of the students in grades 6-12 who were involved in service-learning reflected orally after the service. Moreover, less than 20% reflected in writing. Clearly, the attention devoted to, and quality of, reflection is uneven, possibly due to the aforementioned lack of teacher training in service-learning.

Without quality, well-structured reflections, stereotypes can be reinforced by the service (Beckman, 1997; Cohen, 1994; Erickson & O’Connor, 2000; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Raskoff, 1994; Rhoads, 1998). As an example, experts have documented that many individuals without disabilities experience physiological discomfort, emotional stress, anxiety, and/or interaction strain when encountering a person with a disability (Makas, 1993). They also make less eye contact and maintain greater physical distances (Heinemann, Pellander, Vogelbusch, & Wojtek, 1981). Uncomfortable interactions with people who are perceived to be either lower status or members of “the out-group” (such as people with disabilities) can reinforce stereotypes, result in a greater need to distance ourselves from that “out-group” (Makas, p. 132), and lead to further devaluation of people with disabilities. A study in which high school students without disabilities assisted their classmates with disabilities at the Special Olympics (Burns, Storey, & Certo, 1999) confirmed this. Many students without disabilities expressed embarrassment and unease when working with their classmates with disabilities. For some, these feelings were so intense that they permeated the service experience and resulted in bitterness toward the assignment and the people with whom they were working. This common type of discomfort or emotional strain must be addressed through structured reflection activities.

The reflection should be structured so that students are doing more than a mere “dear diary” journal entry. The reflection should enable students to examine their own beliefs and perceptions and why they hold them (Welch, 1996). Many teachers profess discomfort facilitating this (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997).
They are unsure about what beliefs or perceptions to emphasize or clarify; they are concerned that they may somehow brainwash or indoctrinate students with the wrong values. The values we all hold in common — including integrity, honesty, and respect for others (Etzioni, 1993) — should be emphasized. Additionally, because students will often overlook the underlying causes of problems, or attribute these causes to the differences they see between themselves and others, the reflection should challenge students to examine the underlying causes of the problems encountered by people with disabilities. Further, the reflection should examine if societal shortcomings, not the shortcomings of the individuals with disabilities, may have caused the problems that the service is attempting to address (Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Maybach (1996) added that the structured reflection could take the form of an interactive journal or a joint dialogue in which both students and people with disabilities share their perspectives, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, hopes, dreams, and fears and generally reflect upon the situation at hand. This can lead to increased understanding between the two groups (Kraft, 1996) and also ensure that everyone’s voice is heard.

**An Ideal Service-Learning Project**

Selections of service-learning projects that emphasize political and/or social reconstruction or change rather than charity or giving are the most beneficial to people with disabilities. These projects demonstrate deep passion for the people being served as well as a sophisticated understanding of the social environment (Morton, 1995). Projects that “work to create, evaluate, criticize, and change public institutions and programs” (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996, p. 597) can empower individuals with disabilities as well as help to rectify injustices, change attitudes, and develop caring relationships.

We recognize that service-learning with an emphasis on political or social change or reconstruction can be very controversial. Indeed, Eliasoph (1998) claimed that many projects avoid political or social advocacy or reconstruction so as to avoid personal conflicts with other people. However, a democracy depends on citizens to carry out the political process (Markus, Howard, & King, 1993) and in any democracy there exists what Alejandro (1993) called “a permanent tension” (p. 1) amongst the various constituent groups. Conflict can “deepen and further develop our self-understanding and mission as a community of people” (Cruz, 1989, p. 23). Learning to constructively deal with this conflict ensures that students are prepared to be full and active participants in that democracy.

We cannot recommend a particular social change or civic action project. To do so would convey that we know more than the people with disabilities who reside in our communities. Instead of relying on our word, interview people with disabilities — or better yet — make arrangements for people with disabilities to come to class and discuss their concerns or issues. Based on these issues and concerns, jointly develop and implement a service-learning project, then jointly reflect on the project.

**Conclusion**

Service-learning, as it has been traditionally carried out, can promulgate the disablism inherent in our society and result in a disservice to individuals with disabilities. Thoughtful dialogue with people who have disabilities and training teachers can yield service-learning that ameliorates disablism and promotes the equality of individuals with disabilities. In doing so, the service-learning becomes a vehicle that strengthens all parties involved.

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