

From preview of *Together We Make a Difference: An Inclusive Service Learning Curriculum for Elementary Learners With and Without Disabilities*, by Terri Vandercook and Jo Montie, published January 2010 by the National Inclusion Project in collaboration with the Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota (<http://ici.umn.edu/products/curricula.html#isl>).



# Curriculum Overview

## Introduction

The *Together We Make a Difference* curriculum exemplifies an exciting new focus: inclusive Service Learning. Each lesson is a step in the process of integrating academic content with meaningful community service while supporting the teamwork and contribution of diverse learners of *all* abilities. Lessons are sequenced to help learners get to know one another, appreciate the unique and shared qualities of classmates, and capitalize on the talents of everyone in the group to create a Service Learning project of real benefit to the community. This curriculum overview begins with an overview of Service Learning, including a definition, plus foundational concepts underlying this curriculum. It then takes a closer look at qualities of Service Learning and offers some frameworks and examples.

## What is Inclusive Service Learning?

The *Together We Make a Difference* curriculum involves elementary-age learners in learning while they serve their communities, an approach commonly known as “Service Learning.” Service Learning provides a context for school-based learning that addresses genuine community needs. It involves reflection on both the service activity and the skills and knowledge that were learned or affirmed while engaged in that activity. Because of the emphasis on active learning in real-life settings, Service Learning has the potential to reach all learners.

The National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) describes Service Learning as follows:

“Picking up trash by a riverbank is *service*. Studying water samples under a microscope is *learning*. When learners collect and analyze water samples and the local pollution control agency uses the finding to clean up a river... that is *Service Learning*. (Youth Service America, 2006, p. 7).”

This curriculum would add, “When diverse classmates with differing abilities contribute their unique talents to the Service Learning project, and everyone is viewed as an equally valuable member of the team, that is *inclusive Service Learning*.”

This curriculum is designed to be inclusive. All learners in an elementary school, regardless of ability, are to be included. What children learn about inclusion, participation, and contribution is as important as the academic content and skill sets learned in the process. The inclusive focus makes this Service Learning curriculum unique.

## **About All Learners... or About Learners With Disabilities?**

This curriculum is about all learners and it is about learners with disabilities. Thus, it is about *all* learners: creating supportive classroom communities and Service Learning experiences that embrace all of our learners in their fullness, encompassing commonalities and diversity in all ways. Significantly, this curriculum is also about supporting the instructors to think systematically about learners who may have learning differences and other learners who in some way are more likely to be left out or left behind. So, on the one hand, this curriculum is about all learners, and wanting the adults to not put learners with some type of perceived difference “on the spot” or as a focus in this work. Yet, on the other hand, many learners who may be identified as having a disability are more likely to experience exclusion and separation from the everyday life experiences of many learners without disabilities. So this curriculum puts extra focus on examples and adaptations that attend to learning differences, supporting adults who support the learners (further explained later in this Curriculum Overview under “Tools for Including All Learners in Service Learning”).

This emphasis on including all learners in an elementary school in this curriculum is based on the following foundational concepts:

- **Inclusion is a Value and a Human Right:** The individual authors of this curriculum, the National Inclusion Project, the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Community

Integration, you the reader, and millions of people around the world embrace a value that we all benefit from living in diverse communities that include people of all ages, cultures, and abilities. And in taking a specific look at people with disabilities, there has been steady historical movement toward increased visibility and access, active participation, self-determination, and inclusion in all aspects of life. Our schools, community programs (such as the YWCA and YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and Big Brothers and Big Sisters), and faith communities can both influence and reflect this value that inclusion is the right thing to do.

- **Inclusion Can Work:** Providing inclusive experiences can be hard work, and can be more work than offering Service Learning experiences to a more homogeneous group of learners. However, there are many success stories in which teams have supported all learners to be part of a classroom community; to experience a sense of belonging; to actively participate, contribute, and learn. As one teacher we worked with stated, once you have seen learners succeed in inclusive classrooms, you will never be content to return to more restrictive settings.
- **Inclusive Service Learning Promotes Effective Teaching:** Service Learning is an approach with tremendous benefit for all learners. Many features of Service Learning make it especially appropriate for learners who are challenged by learning in a more traditional, paper-and-pencil style. Service Learning seeks to actively engage learners in hands-on learning about real issues – an approach that can benefit all learners. Service Learning is another way for teachers to further differentiate their instruction and meet the needs of more learners, more often.
- **All Learners are Valued and Can Contribute:** Last, and probably most important, inclusive Service Learning provides the opportunity for learners with disabilities to be seen by classmates and community members in a different light, to be seen learning and contributing to others, rather than only receiving service. Learners with disabilities have all too often been expected to be in passive, receiving roles. How a person is seen or viewed by others has everything to do with the attitudes expressed about the individual, the behaviors that

are expected or not expected, and ultimately the behavior and expectations that the person has about him- or herself. This curriculum intends to change opinions about who can contribute and to learn, ultimately, that each person can contribute and we are all enriched when everyone is supported to do so.