

The RAP: A Recreational Activities Project, Academic Service-Learning Course and Qualitative Research Study

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The author (a university instructor) and her community partner (a public school teacher) have collaborated in teaching an academic service-learning course in special education. This collaboration, the RAP (recreational activities project), was completed by university undergraduate students and young adults with cognitive impairment and/or developmental disabilities. The author discusses the results of this six year project, and implications for both university students in teacher training programs and young adults with disabilities. This article analyzes the quality of social relationships of young adults with and without disabilities and discusses the benefits of a union between qualitative research methods and academic service-learning.

Parents and people with disabilities assert that young adults with disabilities frequently experience feelings of loneliness and isolation (Fain, 1986; Kleinert, Miracle & Sheppard-Jones, 2007; Modell & Valdez, 2002; Smith, 1999). In the past, individuals with cognitive impairment or developmental disabilities have not been included in community recreation and leisure activities to the same extent as individuals without disabilities have. There are many possible reasons cited for this omission including people with disabilities being overlooked (Bedini & McCann, 1992); professionals not understanding leisure activities (Fain, 1986); people with disabilities having no perceived freedom to choose their leisure activities (Lanagan & Dattilo, 1989); and those activities that are offered are planned, rather than spontaneous, when people with disabilities are included (Wilhite, Devine, & Goldenberg, 1999). It is also agreed that teachers can appreciably affect the quality of recreation/leisure skills of their students (Modell & Valdez, 2002; Strand & Kreiner, 2005).

This article presents a method of teaching (Academic Service-Learning AS-L) which allows the user to combine needed, integrated recreation and leisure for adults with disabilities and a way of monitoring the activities through qualitative research methods.

Review of Literature

Participation in community activities of people with disabilities is significantly less than that of people without disabilities (Hoge & Dattilo, 1995), and for people with cognitive impairment/developmental disabilities, less than for people with other types of disabilities (Wagner, Caldwell, Garza, & Cameto, 2004). This social isolation has been a continuing problem for people with disabilities and their families. These patterns of leisure activity have been reported for school-age youth (Kleinert et al., 2007), adults with

disabilities (Hamilton & Anderson, 1983) and particularly, adults with cognitive impairment (Crapps, Langone, & Swaim, 1985; Green & Schleien, 1991). Previous reports on the community involvement of people with disabilities have been discouraging. According to Wagner et al. (2004), one in ten youth were reported to never see friends, and fully one quarter of youth with cognitive impairment were found not to have received a social invitation from a friend during the previous year. Hoge and Dattilo (1995) reported on the patterns of adults with cognitive impairment and found significantly less participation in social activities by adults with cognitive impairment than those without disabilities. When individuals with cognitive impairment do participate in leisure activities, they participate in more passive leisure pursuits, such as watching television or listening to music in their homes (Fain, 1986).

Barriers to Participation

One potential barrier to participation in leisure and recreation activities reported by Wilhite and colleagues (1999) is that of a lack of spontaneity. Most activities are planned for in advance, and/or, usually, offered through formal recreational programs. This indicates persons with disabilities do not have the choice to engage in community services on a par with persons without disabilities due to merely not being asked by anyone. Centro, Schleien, and Hunter (1983) agreed that participation in leisure community activities should be based on the same preferences and decision making for people with disabilities as for people without disabilities. The principles of normalization (Ittenbach, Abery, Larson, Prouty, & Spiegel, 1991), least restrictive environment (Hoge & Dattilo, 1995), incorporated into the Americans with Disabilities Act (Bedini & McCann, 1992) have been cited as blueprints for implementation of recreational activities for people with disabilities. Bedini and McCann (1992) suggested

further that a barrier of omission, whether intentional or not, constitute an obstacle to participation equivalent to any physical barriers. Perrin (1992) also described a major barrier to community participation as being a feeling of persons with disabilities of not being welcome. The idea of social inclusion was analyzed by Abery (2003) and seen as a desirable outcome that is too often not realized for persons with disabilities. This article describes a process for including adults with cognitive impairment/developmental disabilities naturally into the mainstream of community recreation and leisure.

Ittenbach, Abery, Larson, Spiegel, and Prouty (1991) proposed three barriers to recreational/leisure integration faced by individuals with cognitive impairment (as cited in Beirne-Smith, Ittenbach, & Patton, 2002). First, is the lack of someone with whom to do the activity. Lack of companions with whom to socialize could be the lack of spontaneity referred to by Whilte and her colleagues in 1999. Second, is the lack of guidelines available for including this population in recreational programs. Third, is a lack of skills or knowledge of an activity on the part of the individual with cognitive impairment. Other proposed barriers include few opportunities for socialization available to people with disabilities (Crapps et al., 1985) and a lack of feeling welcome to participate in community activities (Perrin, 1992). This study attempts to fill the gap these barriers leave. The purpose of this study has been to increase community presence, and thus social inclusion, of adults with disabilities in their communities.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study have been university undergraduate students in the author's introductory class in cognitive impairment, her community partner's young adult students with developmental disabilities, and individuals with disabilities from local communities who have, or whose families have, requested inclusion in the project. The number of university students has ranged from 30 to 60 each semester, and has been on-going for six years. The students in the community partner's class have numbered 14 to 17 at one time over the years. As the project has gained publicity and more widespread attention, other classes for young adults with disabilities, as well as individuals residing in the community, have been added to the RAP. The current participation in the RAP has grown to include two sections of university students per semester, three classes from area school districts, and approximately 20 individually recruited community members.

Individually recruited participants are those people or their family members who have requested participation in the RAP. The class of young adults with disabilities has remained stable over the years because the students in that class remain there for up to seven years. The ages of the young adults with disabilities ranges from 18 – 26 years. The ages of the university students is comparable for the most part, with only about one percent of them being older, non-traditional university students, having ages from 26 -50 years. The university students are urged to partner with same-age peers with disabilities, however some students may choose to get to know a neighbor better, or pursue a closer relationship with an extended family member.

Academic Service-Learning (AS-L)

Although the project was first begun in order to fulfill a social need for young people with disabilities, it metamorphosed into a teaching method for the university students, as well. The teaching method, academic service-learning, is based on the philosophy of "learning by doing," first put forth by John Dewey (Giles & Eyley, 1994). Rather than participate only in classroom learning, students are expected to participate in some aspect of community living as well. Since the university students participating are all pre-service teachers of students with developmental disabilities, it made sense to engage them in activities with the population with which they would one day be working.

Academic service-learning is uniquely suited to a qualitative study due to the methods used by each. These techniques, academic service-learning and qualitative research methods, share several qualities that make it natural to put them together. Both academic service-learning and qualitative research have evolved into being bigger over time than at the onset. Instead of the instructor/investigator controlling the parameters of the project, the parameters were set by the students/participants. For instance, many students had formed ideas of whom they wanted for a RAP partner that the investigator had not considered. Some students envisioned the RAP as a venue for including family members with disabilities who had previously been excluded from family functions. For these students and their families, the RAP had a more long-lasting effect than the investigator could have predicted. The project grew beyond what the author and community partner first imagined it would be. This is evidenced by the university students' varied reactions to the RAP, from establishing new relationships in their communities to bringing family members with disabilities into the mainstream of activities. In the end, it was the students and their partners who determined the nature of the RAP, not the investigator. It was also not anticipated that community members with

disabilities and their families would request participation in the RAP. The participants, both university students and young adults with disabilities, have determined the course the RAP has taken.

Both academic service-learning and qualitative studies rely on participant feedback for validation of the investigation/course requirement. As an academic services-learning component, the RAP is a course requirement. The university students are required to spend at least 20 hours over 10 visits during the semester socializing with their partners. All students are then required to write journal entries about their experiences that relate to course content being studied. The students are given suggestions of activities to do, but then allowed to do whatever they and their partners decide. During the semester, the instructor guides the class discussion to frequently include RAP experiences, and students are encouraged to discuss and compare their experiences with their classmates. There are class assignments based on the RAP, and in-class member checks and focus groups are periodically established. In fact, everything done in class to explain the RAP is also used as validation for a qualitative research study.

Finally, the RAP is an example of participatory research (Glesne, 2006), as well as an academic service-learning taught course. The RAP is aimed at changing neighborhoods' acceptance of people with disabilities. All participants were also researchers in the joint endeavor of bringing about social change. Each time any RAP partners went out together, they were advocating for the visible acceptance of people with disabilities within their communities. The instructor and principle investigator took on the role of facilitator of the project. Table 1 directs the reader in the development of an AS-L model. Readers are invited and encouraged to duplicate the project because duplication will lead to further inclusion of all people with disabilities in social settings, as well as be of benefit to university students.

Procedure

Methods employed in this study were used to establish trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The first techniques to be employed were used in order to establish credibility. Because this study was over the duration of six years, and is still on-going, the prolonged engagement lends itself to repeated themes by the students of various semesters. These themes were expressed in student journals, in-class focus groups, and member checks. Along with these repeating themes, the students expressed similar experiences and concerns in their pre and post-meeting questionnaires over the years. Those themes encountered most often were thought of as

carrying the most value to the participants, and examples of each are given. The same information was uncovered by different means, thus adding credibility by triangulating the sources used. Much of the data overlapped in participant responses, through class discussions, journals, and questionnaires. Both in-class and out of class focus groups were used in the manner of Heyne, McAvoy, & Schleien (1994) for problem solving issues as they arose. In class, the instructors put students into small groups for the purpose of discussing and comparing their RAP experiences. All participants were given ample opportunities to tell us what they thought about the process, whether they enjoyed the RAP, whether they wanted to participate in it again, and why. Both the author and community partner monitored participation of his/her students, giving help and clarification as needed. Out-of-class focus groups were assembled as new issues were uncovered. For instance, at one point in the project, young adults, their parents and teachers were assembled and asked if the RAP benefits outweighed possible adversities. This focus group was established on an ad hoc basis, but remained in effect for two of the six years.

Both pre- and post-journal questionnaires were kept. These are included in the appendix. The pre journal questionnaire is given to the students prior to their meeting their partners in order to focus student thinking about the project. Students are encouraged to keep these questionnaires for comparison with their journal entries and post questionnaire. The post RAP questionnaire is more detailed, intending for the students to reflect upon their experiences and describe those experiences to each other. Questions are open-ended in order to elicit the true observations of the students. Students are asked by their instructor if their materials can be kept and used for research purposes. Only those who agree hand back their materials for photocopying to the instructor. Table 2 summarizes the methods used in implementing the RAP. Care needs to be taken in preserving the integrity of the project, the clarity of purpose, and the intentions of all participants.

Results

Feedback from the university students was divided into five possible categories: (a) Friendship, (b) Hesitancy, (c) Discovery, (d) Frustration, and (e) Course Assignment. Within these categories, various themes developed. Most of these themes were the same year after year, as each new group of students experienced the RAP. For instance, under the category of friendship, there were some students year after year who found they were building new friendships with their RAP partners. These themes are discussed within the category each was mentioned most often.

Table 1
Establishing an AS-L University Course

Steps	Activities
1. Proximity	House class for young adults with disabilities on a university/college campus
2. Collaboration	Instructors of both classes work together to develop the service to be provided by the university students
3. Joint activities	Offer joint activities for the class members, such as getting together for coffee at the student union
4. Course requirements service to be offered	Determine exact requirements/components of the
5. Project parameters	Include in the university syllabus all components of the project

Table 2
Validation of the RAP

Criterion	Technique Employed
Credibility Transferability & Dependability	triangulation (for information gathered, ie, journals, questionnaires, member checks) prolonged engagement, large sample size
Trustworthiness	in and out of class focus groups

Representative quotes from some of the students have been included in each category.

1. Friendship: "Building a true friendship was the best part of this project."

The first category is reflected by student expressions of friendship or a close relationship developing. The theme most often recurring was that of friendship. Many university students wrote that they had found a new friend. "I made a great new friend and learned a lot from the experience. I will continue to spend time with my RAP partner." Some students wrote that they wanted to share their experiences with others. "I just hope that he has had the same great experience that I have had. I wish more people could see how much people with cognitive impairments have to offer."

When asked what they had learned that surprised them, many students said they were surprised to find a new friend. As one student wrote, "I really enjoyed the RAP assignment. I enjoyed getting to know my RAP friend and plan on continuing our friendship." The adults without disabilities looked forward to the possibility of making a new friend.

2. Hesitancy: "using people for a grade"

The second category is comprised of students who were hesitant to complete the project because they believed it was unfair to the individuals with disabilities. Some students said they did not want to do the RAP and felt it was "using people for a grade." These people worried that their partners would not benefit from the experience, but possibly be emotionally upset by it. This position was demonstrated by comments such as, "I'm afraid my RAP partner will not understand why I am seeing him every week for ten weeks and then will suddenly stop when the semester ends." Along the same thought, one year a mother of one young adult complained that her son was very disappointed that his RAP partner did not call anymore. When asked why she allowed her son to participate, she said that he was an adult and he wanted to. Although some people felt young adults with disabilities were "being used for a grade," the young adults themselves were eager for the experience. The community partner, himself a dedicated advocate of the young people he taught, expressed the idea that young people are entitled to experience all of life's experiences, good and bad.

Another young man who was repeatedly stood up by his partner (whose journals were fabricated) was asked if he wanted to participate in the RAP anymore and answered, "Yes," and asked who his next semester's partner would be.

This partnership did bring up the possibility of fraud and the emotional damage that could be done to participants. A group of parents, teachers, and young people was assembled to discuss this issue. The young people insisted they wanted to participate in the RAP and that having someone to do things with was better than not being able to go anywhere at all. As the community partner had earlier expressed, it was not doing the young people a favor to shelter them from adverse experiences, and that, quite the contrary, the young people needed to experience negative situations in order to learn how to handle things that happened to them in the future.

3. Discovery: "I never knew that I would develop such a new respect for people with disabilities."

The third category is comprised of student comments of discovering different things about their partners. This group had many reservations about the RAP, but came away with positive comments about their experiences, and their partners. Some typical comments from this group were reflected by their answers to questions included in post-RAP questionnaires. To the question, "What happened that you least expected?", one student reported, "I did not think I would get as close to my RAP partner as I did. When we spent time together, it was very enjoyable." Some people expressed the idea that they not only got to know adults with cognitive impairment, but had also increased their comfort levels with associating with them. "I knew that it would be awkward in the beginning when we first met, but I didn't expect to become as comfortable as I did," one participant said of her RAP experience. The university students also commented on being pleasantly surprised that their partners were not so different from them. As one student said, "I really didn't expect my RAP partner to have so much in common with me." Expressing the same sense of surprise, another commented, "I never anticipated meeting a new friend." When asked what one thing was memorable about the RAP, a representative response from this group was, "The amount of comfort and knowledge I have gained from this interactive experience."

4. Frustration: "He didn't even know he was being rude."

These students expressed the theme of being frustrated at certain aspects of their experiences. These

students looked forward to completing the RAP, but did not have good experiences for different reasons. Some factors that contributed to student disappointment with the RAP over the years include (a) physical exertions, such as, pushing a heavy wheelchair uphill, (b) emotional disappointments, such as not sharing interests or preferred activities, and (c) intellectual realizations, such as a realization of a lack of social skills or exhibition of rude or self-centered behavior from their partners. Comments representative of this group were, "We just didn't have anything in common, so I know we won't stay close." Students expressed their frustrations with their RAP partners' lack of social skills or social awareness as reflected in comments such as, "I wanted to apologize for the way he acted," and "I was so embarrassed, but she didn't even notice." Many students in this group commented on outside factors over which they had no control, such as the way parents interacted with their adult children. Some complaints were that parents were overprotective, not allowing students to go out in the community, or always accompanied the partners on their outings. Some students noticed their partners' personalities changed when around their parents as opposed to peers and felt they didn't have as rich an experience because of that.

5. Course assignment: "Projects such as the RAP bring light into the communities..."

There were two major themes that emerged from the students in this category. The category is composed of comments that reflect the nature of the course assignment. One theme is best described as neutral. The students didn't see any benefit or detriment involved with the RAP. As one student said, "It was an assignment. I did it, and made the grade."

Many students in this category, though, did express the idea that they benefited from the RAP experience. "I was really able to get a sense of the importance of making people more aware and knowledgeable of individuals with disabilities." "I cannot even stress the amount of knowledge that I have acquired because of the field experience in this course. I do know that I will be a better educator in the future because of my experiences, though." Many students commented that they learned more about the individuals they someday want to teach, individuals with cognitive impairment (CI): "I liked that I had to find new ways of dealing with different situations and I had a first hand look at the life of an adult with CI." This comment was typical of many responses from students who felt better prepared to be teachers. "I learned so much about myself, as well as adults with CI."

Discussion

One interesting aspect of this project was that every student interpreted the RAP in his/her own way. As with any course, each student seemed to get out of it as much as he/she put into it, or expected to learn from it. The evolution of the RAP over the years has given a unique perspective to relationships between young adults with and without disabilities. A similar project (Families and Communities Together Coalition – FACT, 2001) was previously completed in Kalamazoo, Michigan. This project was a collaboration of faculty at Michigan State University and city officials in Kalamazoo with the purpose of bringing together youth with and without disabilities to participate in recreational programs. Though the project has ended, developers reported that many former participants continue including each other in recreational activities. The wish to continue including others in recreational activities was present in the current study as well.

Other studies done with university students as participants were done prior to the RAP (Green, Schleien, Mactavish, & Benepe, 1995; Hamilton & Anderson, 1983). As with the Green et al. study (1995), university undergraduate students were paired with same-age young adults with cognitive impairment/developmental disabilities. In both cases, the students were to meet socially as equals for a specified number of weeks during the school semester. In both cases, the university students were fulfilling a course requirement. In both cases, it was found that both university students and young adults with disabilities wanted to establish friendly relationships. As reported by the Green et al. study (1995), most university students approached relationships with adults with mental retardation with “cautious optimism.”

The study by Hamilton and Anderson (1983) also used undergraduate students as participants, but the students were grouped with individuals with physical disabilities. Although individual demands may have been different based on specific disabilities, the premise is the same though: attitudes toward people with disabilities can be changed through joint participation in recreational activities.

There are major differences among the RAP and previous studies. In both prior studies, the university students were enrolled in recreation courses, not in a special education teacher training program. This is one major difference in this study and that done by Green et al. (1995): the participants in the current study are students in special education studying to become teachers of students with mental retardation. Because of this, the special education students may have been initially more open to establishing friendship relationships with their partners and perceived friendships more readily than the students in the Green

et al. study; however no studies were found using special education students as participants. Green & Schleien (1991) did notice that staff who worked with individuals with disabilities tended to accept individuals regardless of social skills deficits. This phenomenon may also have been affecting the students in the RAP, since they expected to someday teach individuals with similar characteristics.

Some of the students in the RAP had prior experience with individuals (either adults or children) who have cognitive impairment or developmental disabilities. In fact, it may be possible that they had more experience than the students of the previous studies. However, prior experience with adults was not usually the case, and some students commented that they had never had any experience with an adult who has a cognitive impairment/developmental disability. Prior to taking this introductory course in cognitive impairment, the students are expected to have taken at least one other course in special education, and possibly more. Due to their special education backgrounds, the students in the RAP may have demonstrated a heightened awareness of the issues facing adults with disabilities, and so were possibly more prepared in what to expect than the recreation students. During the present course, as well, issues facing adults with cognitive impairment are frequently discussed and referenced to the RAP. As an AS-L course, the service component (the RAP) is closely aligned with course content, so students are continually hearing the RAP being compared to theory and issues in cognitive impairment.

Another major difference between the RAP and previous studies is the large sample size. A major strength of the current study is length of time it has been in operation. As a matter of fact, it is still ongoing, with no plans to end it in sight. Although exact numbers are not available due to students not completing the course or the project, numbers of class sizes are available, and attrition of participants was minimal. For the first four years of the project, 60 students per year were enrolled in the course. For the last two years, more sections were offered, so the count was 100 students per year. If everyone enrolled had completed the project, approximately 440 participants would have gone through the RAP. As it was, based on grades given, 420 persons completed the RAP over the past six years. Given this large a sample size, and the prolonged nature of the project, the investigator can be more confident that the results obtained are truly representative of undergraduate university students who are completing a teacher preparation program in special education and the type of relationships they tend to establish with adults who have cognitive impairment/developmental disabilities.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the RAP study that need clarification. The first one is the lack of a specific number of participants in the project. Due to the nature and popularity of the RAP, it was impossible to keep exact numbers of participants. Frequently, participants included their friends or family in RAP outings, and this was encouraged. Since the whole idea of the RAP is to encourage normalized relationships among people with and without disabilities, it wasn't even desirable to keep count of the numbers of participants. In this way, the RAP could not be duplicated exactly.

Although not necessarily a limitation, but worth mentioning, is the possibility of investigator bias. Since the investigator and instructor are the same person, it is inevitable that the way the investigator envisioned the RAP would influence the classroom proceedings (Glesne, 2006).

Another limitation involves the sample used in the RAP. The university student participants are completing the RAP for a grade; it is a course requirement. For this reason, the level of commitment by the students to the underlying principles of the RAP is unknown. It is also unknown how the students chose to complete the project. Students may have chosen to not go out in the community, or were prevented from doing so for a variety of reasons. There is a possibility of fraud, students fabricating journals, and not doing what was reported to have been done. These limitations need to be weighed carefully against the possible benefits of the RAP.

Directions for Future Research

The RAP needs to be instigated in many more communities before the visible integration of people with disabilities is commonplace. A university campus is an ideal place to begin. University students who are training to be teachers are perfect candidates to integrate people with disabilities into the mainstream, and sharing recreational and leisure activities is fun. It is possible that students would meet someone who has a disability and go out socially with that person, but the RAP makes the possibility a certainty. Students in special education are learning about advocacy of people with disabilities. Through AS-L projects like the RAP, students can practice that advocacy, and become better future teachers. The combination of academic service-learning and qualitative research allows instructors and their students to make a positive and lasting contribution to the social lives of individuals with disabilities.

This study added to the growing body of literature expressing the recreational/leisure needs of young adults with disabilities. At the same time, this study

explored the utility of employing academic service-learning as a teaching method and employing qualitative research. There have been both benefits and drawbacks to everyone involved. The RAP has been continued in the belief that the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. By continuing to send university students into the communities where they live with same-age peers with disabilities, we are heightening community awareness of people with disabilities, increasing their visibility in society, and teaching university students to advocate for individuals with disabilities.

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Appendix

Pre-journal Questionnaire

1. What are your concerns about the RAP?
2. What are your interests in the RAP?
3. What are your expectations of the RAP?
- 4.

Post-journal Questionnaire

After being assigned to your group, appoint one recorder to write the answers to these questions. Spend approximately four minutes per question comparing each group member's experiences. Appoint one spokesperson to discuss the results with the entire class.

1. What have you learned from this project?
2. What happened that surprised you?
3. What happened that you most expected?
4. What happened that you least expected?
5. What made you feel the most uncomfortable?
6. How do you think #4 should be dealt with?
7. What did you like best about this project?
8. What did you like least about this project?
9. What was most memorable for you about the RAP?
10. What changes would you recommend for this project?