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Abstract

Bleak transition outcomes for youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), coupled with the surge in incidence, has led to the need for focused and innovative transition strategies. While structured community service reveals promise, documentation of how community service experiences contribute to building employment skills for youth with intellectual/developmental disability (IDD), including those with ASD, is under-researched. The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of a community service on employment skill-building for youth with ASD. Findings from 23 qualitative interviews with a range of stakeholders showed positive perceptions in the areas of career exploration, self-determination, and social skill building. Implications emphasize the likely benefits of structured community service and the potential to maximize the connection to employment, and thus community inclusion, for transition-age youth with ASD.

Exploring the Impact of Community Service on Career Exploration, Self-Determination, and Social Skills for Transition-Age Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) more than thirty years ago, an increasing number of youth with disabilities, including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), have been receiving “free and appropriate” special-education services in the United States. A portion of services, which are detailed by the student’s Individual Educational Plan (IEP), are devoted to transition planning and begin around age 14. This planning should result in opportunities and achievements after the student graduates high school.

The intended outcomes from this legislation, however, are seldom the reality. Limited post-secondary and employment transition outcomes of youth with ASD represent a critical barrier to full and meaningful community inclusion. Current research indicates that only a small percentage of students with intellectual/developmental disability (IDD), which includes individuals with ASD, who are transitioning from education to adult life find employment after exiting school (Newman et al., 2011; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). In fact, individuals with ASD have some of the lowest workforce participation rates even when compared to other disability groups (Shattuck et al., 2012). Furthermore, individuals with ASD are underemployed or employed in positions that are inappropriate given their skill set (Barnhill, 2007). While there are many issues that can influence employment outcomes, a comprehensive literature review conducted by the authors (NextSTEP, 2012a;b;c;d) identified social skills, self-determination, and career development as critical variables that can affect post-school experiences for youth with who are transitioning into adult life. The overarching purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of a community service experience on these three domains for youth with ASD. It remains critical for the field of intellectual/developmental disability research to understand

findings related the transition needs and strategies for youth with ASD as this population is not only part of the developmental disability community, but many have a diagnosed intellectual disability as well. Furthermore, several factors have lead a much higher prevalence of ASD diagnoses in the past decade, which some estimates showing an increase from 1 in sixty-eight to one in forty-five (Zablotsy, et al., 2015). Public and professional awareness of ASD, earlier assessments, increased accuracy in diagnosing the disorder, and a better understanding of how ASD differs from other diagnoses, also contribute to the rising prevalence (Matson & Kozlowski, 2010).

Limitations in Social Engagement

Individuals with intellectual/developmental disability, including those with ASD, tend to have small social networks, often comprised mainly of paid support staff, parents, and others with disabilities (Bolick, 2008; Lippold & Burns, 2009). Small personal networks can decrease opportunities for employment-related networking, often considered among the most promising career exploration strategies for youth (Van Hoyer, van Hooft, & Lievens, 2009). Moreover, social skills in general have been associated with positive employment and educational outcomes (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012). For individuals with ASD, challenges specific to the disability exist, including difficulty with forming and maintaining social relationships, difficulty with communication, and restricted or stereotyped behaviors and interests (Newman et al., 2011). Such difficulty with reciprocal social interactions and interpersonal communication may further inhibit job searching and success in the workplace.

Limited Opportunities for Leadership and Development

Research shows a correlation between positive transition outcomes and self-advocacy and self-determination (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997, as cited in Test et al., 2009). However, youth

with disabilities, including those with ASD, often experience limited leadership and development activities. At the same time studies have shown student's desire to be considered experts and consulted in decisions that affect their lives (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2004), which emphasizes importance to create opportunities for students to practice their leadership roles. Recent research shows that few students take a leadership role in their transition planning, and that students with intellectual/developmental disability are significantly less likely than students with other disabilities do so (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). Students with IDD are not often present at transition planning meetings, and rarely lead them (Cameto, Marder, Wagner, & Cardoso, 2003). This is potentially problematic, since the opportunities to build student-directedness and self-determination are fundamental to the transition planning and the accomplishment of work-related goals (Brugnaró & Timmons, 2007).

Career preparatory experiences that build soft skills

Along with opportunities to practice self-determination, career preparatory experiences correlate with positive post-high school employment status for youth with disabilities (Landmark, Ju, & Zhang, 2010; Lindstrom, Doren, & Miesch, 2011). Such experiences build "soft skills" related to communication, enthusiasm, teamwork, networking, problem solving and critical thinking, and professionalism (Office of Disability Employment Policy [ODEP], 2012). Research has also found that community-based on-the-job training in inclusive settings with non-disabled peers was correlated with integrated employment outcomes for transitioning youth with disabilities (Test et al., 2009).

Although the value of career preparatory experiences appears evident, the elusiveness of early work experiences for many youth with disabilities is widely recognized (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2011). Special-education teachers report no designated responsibility for helping

transition-age youth work toward non-academic goals (Trainor, Carter, Owens, & Swedeen, 2008). Work experiences for students with disabilities are primarily classroom or school-based non-paid jobs, with only a small portion of students involved in career exploration, career counseling, or future planning (Reynoso, Henry, Kwan, Sulewski, & Thomas, 2011). Limited opportunities for authentic work experience can negatively impact post-transition employment success (Landmark et al., 2010; Reynoso et al., 2011). These challenges can make the development of promising transition strategies complex, and has led to a growing recognition of the need for focused and innovative transition supports.

Structured community service has emerged as a promising community-based transition strategy (NextSTEP, 2012a), but has yet to be researched extensively. National service (e.g., programs such as AmeriCorps) represents an avenue through which young adults can explore career paths and develop the social networks necessary to gain meaningful employment (Boteach, Moses, & Sagawa, 2009; VeraWorks, 2008). Through a real-world experience, youth can gain professional skills while positively impacting their local communities (NextSTEP, 2012d). Youth improve the quality of life within their communities while becoming part of a broader network (Boteach et al., 2009). Through community service, youth are engaged in challenging and meaningful tasks that promote broader social learning, teamwork, and interpersonal skills (NextSTEP, 2012a). Thus, the provision of services to the community occurs alongside increased self-awareness and personal learning (Bartel, Saavedra, & Van Dyne, 2001).

While the literature reveals the promise of community service for youth, documentation of how community service experiences contribute to employment skill building is under-researched, as shown by the scarcity of evidenced-based research found during recent comprehensive literature reviews (NextSTEP, 2012a; b; c; d). The current study builds on

previous research conducted by the authors (NextSTEP, 2012a; b; c; d) that considers the impact of community service experiences on self-determination, social skills, and career exploration for individuals with ASD. Thus, these domains were addressed throughout the data collection process, although referenced in an open-ended nature to allow for the participants' experiences to shape the themes that emerged.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of a community service experience on employment skill-building for youth with ASD in the areas of career development, self-determination and social skills. The current study describes the engagement of transition-age youth with ASD in a community service activity (called Project Impact, described below). The following questions frame the study: 1) What were stakeholder beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of the community service experience on building employment skills for youth? 2) What did stakeholders perceive as the impact of participation on career exploration, self-determination, and social skills acquisition for youth? 3) What factors need to be considered when applying these perceptions and experiences towards a transition strategy?

Overview of Project Impact

Project Impact was created by the Florida Governor's Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service, Volunteer Florida, as a signature project to accomplish three goals. The first is to provide hands-on service opportunities for youth with disabilities. The second is to offer career exploration through the planning and completion of a youth-led service project. The third is to create mutually beneficial partnerships between AmeriCorps programs, local school districts, and disability organizations.

Project Impact is an intensive community service experience that is planned and implemented over a five-month period with youth with disabilities in Florida. Facilitators use a

comprehensive activity guide, ensuring continuity among locations. A copy of the Project Impact Activity Guide For Facilitators and Mentors is available for download at https://www.communityinclusion.org/project.php?project_id=59. Although implemented specifically with youth (most of the time in high schools), it differs from service-learning in that it does not include a curriculum component (Kielsmeier, Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Neal, 2004). It also differs from formal national service programs (e.g., AmeriCorps), which typically require a formal, time-specific commitment from their members.

Youth are guided through the activities by trained AmeriCorps staff who act as facilitators. In addition, mentors support the students throughout the activities. These mentors are also currently enrolled in AmeriCorps programs. Other key players may include personnel from a local disability organization and classroom teachers. Project Impact starts with a student-led community mapping exercise. In community mapping, students identify a community problem and the resources needed to address it. The students develop a plan for a service activity that will address the problem, and then implement the service activity.

Each month, students meet in groups with their AmeriCorps facilitators and mentors. Together, they decide on a service activity to address an identified community problem. Once the plan is developed, the students identify supplies for the activity and determine expenses. They discuss areas of collaboration with organizations in the community, and create a plan for marketing the service project. The students outline the service project's timeline, their roles, and their responsibilities. Throughout the project, they participate in regular reflection activities that allow them to consider the skills they are developing and the impact they are having in their community. After completion of the service project, they reflect on and celebrate their

accomplishment. For more information on Project Impact, including student activities, see:

http://www.communityinclusion.org/doc.php?doc_id=91&type=project&id=59.

Through Project Impact, Florida AmeriCorps programs, in conjunction with a range of community partners, have implemented 40 community-service projects with 500 youth with a range of disabilities in 12 Florida counties. Because the students choose the problem they wish to address, the service projects have been diverse. They have included tutoring, grounds beautification at local parks, cooking meals for those experiencing hunger, toiletry and canned food drives, recreational activities at assisted living facilities, and even restoring oyster beds.

Research locations and the service projects

Project Impact was implemented in three high schools across two Florida counties. School #1 in Jacksonville, FL conducted a school-wide food drive. The students created posters, drop boxes, and announcements for the school news. They delivered, sorted, and stocked the food at a local food pantry. School #2 in Jacksonville had many students interested in animals and animal care. They prepared animal foods and beautified the grounds at the Jacksonville Zoo. A zoo contact visited classrooms to discuss the range of jobs offered at the zoo. In Fort Myers, students prepared a special lunch for fellow classmates who experience food insecurity. They engaged the junior ROTC [Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps] students in the lunch, and all three groups (the ROTC, the students with ASD, and the service recipients) participated in recreational, team-building activities.

Methods

The following section will review a) school and student recruitment, b) data collection, and c) data analysis.

School and Student Recruitment

A purposive sampling strategy was conceptually driven by the study's research questions, which addressed perceptions and experiences of the community service activity as a successful transition strategy for youth with ASD. Purposive sampling was used not only to select the most appropriate programs, but also the most appropriate youth within those programs. The research team used prior knowledge of Florida geography as well as the available service-related programs to choose participants who were likely to provide rich data (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 1994). Purposeful sampling was used to achieve maximum variation in geographic representation among the programs, as well as diversity in gender, age, disability level, and ethnicity across the sample of youth participants (Patton, 1999).

School recruitment. Researchers identified school systems to participate in the project in part through pre-existing professional relationships. Once schools were identified, school administrators were contacted over the phone. Researchers provided an overview of the project and requested their participation. Each administrator was given a fact sheet summarizing the study. Project overview orientations were conducted with key staff in the district with those who agreed to participate. Specific high schools were then chosen, as well as lead staff at each high school. These lead staff acted as project liaisons, coordinating all research activities.

Student recruitment. Project liaisons at each high school facilitated student and parent recruitment. Teachers sent home information packets with consent forms to parents. As part of the consent process, students and parents could inform researchers of their interest in being interviewed by checking a box at the end of the form. Upon learning of each individual's interest in participation, researchers used a fact sheet to ensure clear communication and full participant understanding. Researchers also emphasized that at any time during the study, respondents had the option to end their participation. Upon consent, research staff then conducted the interviews

with those who agreed. Because the focus of the study was a subgroup of youth with ASD, researchers focused on a more a homogenous sampling strategy when recruiting for the students to best understand the full range of experiences for this group (Patton, 1999).

Data Collection

Researchers and lead staff coordinated an in-person visit to conduct the interviews. The interviews were thirty-minute to one-hour-long and were conducted with students, parents, AmeriCorps members, program personnel, teachers, and school staff. The sample for this study consisted of 23 interviews representing various stakeholder groups. Specifically, the research team interviewed six teachers/school staff (two from each school), three Project Impact facilitators (one from each school), five mentors (two from two schools and one from one school), and three parents (one from each school), and six students. Six students interviewed were all male who lived at home with their parents. Five of the six students were described as Caucasian and one as Hispanic. Five of the six students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. All participating schools were represented within the student sample. Please see Table 1 for detailed demographic data collected on the six student participants.

Insert Table one here

Twenty of the interviews were conducted face to face, and three were conducted on the phone. Although the interview was guided by the semi-structured protocol, the researchers encouraged a free-flowing conversation.

Interview protocols varied slightly depending on the participant group, but as per the study's overarching research questions, all interview protocols explored the concepts of career exploration, social skills, and self-determination in relation to the community service experience. Broadly, students were asked about their overall experience, what they learned from the service

project, and the ways in which the experience allowed them an opportunity for career exploration, skill building, and social skills development. Parents were asked the same questions with reference to their young adult. Program personnel, teachers, and school staff were asked about perceptions of program effectiveness in relation to employment goals, identification of barriers, and recommendations about better connecting the community service experience to future work. Finally, AmeriCorps members (who acted as support to the facilitators as student mentors) were asked to what extent they mentored on factors related to employment, what impact they perceived the community service experience having on youth participants, and what the overall benefit was of being a mentor. The researchers prioritized interviewing all the participant groups since multiple perspectives of respondents shed light on various components of the experience. Triangulation of sources can lead to more valid conclusions than what could be surmised from just one type of respondent (Patton, 1999).

Data Analysis

Research staff used elements of comparative and thematic analyses. (Glaser, 1965). Comparative analysis was used in considering the data against the themes identified in the authors' previous research (career exploration, self-determination, and social skills). Thematic analysis allowed the opportunity for researchers to identify, and describe patterns that emerged from the data. The following steps were employed during data analysis: a) coding, and b) memo writing.

Coding. Coding is an early and ongoing way of labeling data to sort it and assign meaning (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Operational definitions for each code were developed in order to ensure that the research team had a shared understanding of the code. At the time of coding list development, the research team conducted reliability checks by coding the interview

transcripts simultaneously. Reconciliation of code definitions was ensured through regularly scheduled project meetings. The final coding list can be found in Table 2.

Insert Table two here

A qualitative software program (Atlas.ti for the PC) was used to store coded transcripts, and sort data. Once the coding process was established, team members were assigned documents to code in Atlas.ti, and then these documents were secondarily coded by another team member. The researchers simultaneously coded and analyzed the data, often meeting as a team to ensure reliability, improve the team's understanding of the data, and explore the similarities and differences between people's employment experiences (Charmaz, 2000).

Memo writing. Once all transcripts were primary- and secondary-coded, Atlas.ti was used to generate reports. The data from the reports was used to write memos. The memos allowed the research team to further interpret, and analyze the data (Creswell, 1998), as well as organizing it into themes. The researchers met regularly to discuss the memos generated. All memos were reviewed by other team members to provide feedback, and in order to remain abreast of key themes emerging in various coding reports. This process ensured consistency in memo development and how emerging themes were related. The themes and findings were continuously interrogated and clarified throughout discussions using a constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965).

Findings

The following findings section is organized to shed light on the research questions that address stakeholder perceptions of the community service experience and how it related to building skills in the areas of career development, self-determination, and social skills acquisition for youth participants. The findings emphasize common themes across the range of stakeholder groups in an attempt to understand the potential value of the community service experience in

the three areas. There were very minor differences between various stakeholders in how they described the impact of the experience on students.

Career development findings included the building of soft skills necessary for work and offering an opportunity to try something new. Findings related to self-determination included providing an opportunity to practice decision-making, increasing student self-confidence, creating a sense of student pride and ownership, and movement from being recipients of services to providers of solutions. Findings related to social skills included the broadening of social networks and practicing building rapport with new people.

Career Development

Stakeholders explained that participation in the service experience impacted student career development by a) building soft skills necessary for work, and b) offering an opportunity to try something new. Each is explained in more detail below.

Building soft skills necessary for work. Throughout the community service project planning and implementation, students appeared to be gaining not only hard skills such as sorting, packing, food preparation and animal care, but also soft skills such as working collaboratively. As one student who participated in the zoo beautification project said, “It taught me how to care for animals and it taught me the safeties with certain animals and how to...pick up trash. Keep stuff clean. Oh, yeah, and also how to work as a team.” Similarly, a parent explained that her son gained teamwork skills while sorting food at the food bank. Students were divided into teams, sorting food in bins and stocking shelves. Each student had to wait patiently to receive instructions, communicate with each other, and make decisions as a group as they completed tasks. Another example of teamwork can be seen in a quote from a facilitator who reflected on the same project:

“...every group was a group of four or five students, so they had to communicate with each other, ‘Okay, this can has an expiration date, or it has expired’... so they were communicating that. And they also tried to work (so that) one person had one task, and then the other people had other tasks. So they kind of helped assign each other tasks.”

In addition to working collaboratively, students exhibited perseverance and the ability to follow through with tasks assigned by those in charge. One facilitator recalled the resolve of one of her students: “He didn't give up and he didn't quit and he kept going. And he took direction from the other students as well as the teacher. And he wasn't mad about it.” Similarly, a student explained that he learned how to “listen to the workers that are in charge,” while another illustrated how he learned to listen and take direction in this way:

“Well, the first time they have to--after he showed me, before I actual[ly] do it...I just had to listen, make sure I hear some advices before I do this. I don't want to actual[ly] do it...if there is no directions... but if I just take my time and listen to [what] that person is saying, I might have information so that way I might really learn to do it...”

Interviewees also explained that another soft skill developed during the community service experience was interpersonal skill building. Students had the opportunity to practice interacting with new people for the first time, such as Project Impact facilitators, mentors, and professionals at the service sites. Interactions with new people allowed students to practice maintaining eye contact, engaging in proper introductions, not interrupting when others are talking, and hand-shaking. A parent reported her surprise when her son told her, “I'm concentrating more on making eye contact in talking to people.” Interviewees explained how intentionally practicing such skills with strangers in a safe environment is especially important considering the unique characteristics of ASD. One teacher said, “Just as many new people we can introduce them to--introductions, greetings, how you interact...how [to act in this] this new--environment [when] everything is strange to them...is a good thing.” Another teacher explained

that students who participated in the beautification project at the zoo really “took to the [zoo] personnel”:

“...we had faculty from the zoo coming in and out and saying hi and introducing themselves and talking...and [the students] were just raising their hands and talking to them like it was nothing...[even though] we were strangers to [their] environment.”

The opportunity to try something new. Interviewees explained that the service experience appeared to expose students to new ideas, new aspects of their communities, and new options. When asked what he learned from the community service experience that was new, one student indicated the realization, “I like to help.” One Project Impact facilitator noted that simply seeing a food storage warehouse with forklifts was a new and interesting aspect of their community that they had not seen before. A student who sorted canned goods at this facility shared a similar perspective about trying something new. He said, “it’s very important for me to go because [I] can’t stay the same way all the time...trying to find new [options] is probably the best choice I’ve ever [made]”. Another example was the zoo, which created a previously unrecognized career option for students, many of whom were interested in working with animals. During a classroom visit from a zoo staff member, students listed all the various jobs at a zoo from ticketing agents, to parking lot attendants, to gift shop clerks. Students also appreciated the opportunity to be exposed to something different. As one student explained, “The reason why it really affected me is because [I] might never try... but sometimes I do something new. I may not like it, but once I tried, that’s when I like it.”

Self-Determination

Interviewees explained that participation in the service experience allowed them to build self-determination skills through a) practicing decision-making, b) increasing self-confidence, c)

creating a sense of pride and ownership, and d) moving them from being recipients of services to providers of solutions. Each is described in more detail.

Practicing decision-making. Participation in the service project allowed students to practice decision-making in a few different ways. For example, Project Impact facilitators used a voting process to ensure that each student had a part in deciding which community issue was most important to him/her to address. Students reported feeling empowered by the voting process, “it felt great” said one student, to cast his vote for the zoo. Another said, “we want to vote for what we want to do and where we want to go.” One of the teacher confirmed, “[Choosing the service project at the zoo] was definitely student driven. They didn’t let anybody sway them in any other direction. It was the zoo.” A teacher from a different school described the unusual outspokenness that she overheard as her students were debating which project to choose:

“When they were developing what community project they wanted to do, they made a list, and the list was small, and it had a few other things on there. And I heard them just throwing out like they were in a board meeting. Just throwing out, yelling out, ‘No I don’t like that. Why we got to do that? That doesn’t make any sense.’ And they were rationalizing with each other, ‘Well, if we do this, we could do this.’ And they were having this debate, which is not common with our students. So I was impressed...Even though the topic was kind of introduced, and kind of governed, that did give them that free opportunity and that open invitation to [feel that] ‘I can talk in here. They want me to talk, and I can talk loud.’”

Once projects were chosen, the students practiced decision making by choosing tasks to market their projects. The students having the school-wide food drive decided to make flyers, hang posters, elect a student to announce the project on the school news, and post their service activity on their social media pages. While the adults guiding the students supported the decisions, “these were their ideas,” said one mentor.

There was variation, however, in building self-determination skills based on the student's level of support need. Interviewees explained that it was a challenge to build leadership opportunities for those students who were not typically leaders. The students participating most during these discussions were those that were typically more verbal in the classroom on any given day. Facilitators and teachers had to work hard to get non-verbal students engaged. For example, prior to voting, final project choices were drawn on the board to increase accessibility. Non-verbal students were given sticky notes to place next to the drawing as a way to vote for the project of their choice.

Increased self-confidence. Students showed their confidence by telling interviewers about tasks they excelled at, such as food preparation: "I was good at it," a student explained. When asked whether he discovered something new about himself, this student went on to say with assurance, "Yes. I am a good helper and ...a good learner." While the students saw these changes in themselves, others appeared to observe the changes in self-confidence as well. A facilitator commented: "You could tell each time in [the students'] body language that they were more confident with people." Another said, as time went on, one student went from acting rather quiet, to "directing other students" and "taking charge." One parent described her child as feeling better "about himself, his abilities, it's just a matter of 'I have more confidence, I'm reassured.'" One mentor explained how a student showed confidence in his own leadership skills and even began giving direction to others:

"He would make a lot of comments about being a good manager, and how it wasn't bossing people around, but helping them--and not telling people what to do, but helping them do their job better. I think he actually said that in those words, so that was really surprising. That was good."

Sense of pride and ownership. Interviewees agreed that students were proud and "owned" the service projects--and that this was a key feature of the success of the project.

A mentor provided an example of how teachers created a competition between the classrooms regarding the food pantry service project, and that this helped to create a personal investment for the students:

“[The teacher] made it a competition amongst the classrooms with the autism students along with what everybody else had donated. So the bulk of the food actually came from this department, the autism department, from the students.”

Another teacher described the student sense of ownership by saying, “It was their project. They did have that sense of *we’re* doing this. This is ours.” This teacher was moved by the students’ level of investment, which he found unexpected: “A lot of them are very ... apathetic--so seeing them care--just caring about something other than what they're going to watch or play when they get home was a big deal.” In fact, there was so much pride, he went on to explain that with one student in particular he “actually had to turn it into a lesson of not being too boastful.” In addition, the following quote from a parent shows her observation of her son’s ownership in the community service experience:

“It was as if he made a commitment to it, and he had to be here to uphold his commitment. But this time, it was a little different. It was like, ‘I’ve got to do this because of something outside of me.’ Not ‘This is fun. I want to do it.’ But this was a, ‘I need to do this. I need to participate in this project.’ He specifically said--those were his words--‘I need to be there for my community service project.’”

Students moving from being recipients to providers. Through the community service experience, interviewees agreed that youth came to view themselves not as recipients of services, but as providers of solutions. This contributed to a more positive perception of their own abilities and served to build confidence and self-determination skills. One student said, “...In spite of what kind of disability I have, I'm still able to give, and I'm still here to do my community service hours.” Furthermore, hands-on participation and completion of the project made the youth feel that they were important and capable contributors. Seeing positive outcomes of their

work gave them a sense of empowerment. They were capable of doing something important for their community. One teacher said,

“I don't think any of them thought they were doing it for them...it wasn't just today we're doing some random activity--that they were doing it to help someone else that needed help that couldn't do it for themselves right now. And I think that's one of the reasons they liked it. One thing about this student population--most all of them love helping people--if you ask them, they'll help you. And so when they see that, they get excited.”

For youth participants, their traditional role as students in special education classes became reversed. Instead of being recipients of services, they became problem-solvers within the communities in which they are members. One teacher explained, “Some students never thought they could help anybody else. So they were able to help--we helped the community...by feeding other people.” She went on to say how she felt the experience made her students more inclined to serve others in the future and feel more included as members of their communities: “So I think they got that perspective, that now I am a part of a community. I make up this community.” A student, in fact, verified this increased likelihood to serve in the future. When asked what he thought of the food pantry experience, he indicated his intention to continue in the role of provider: “I'm going to volunteer [at the food pantry] after I turn 16.”

Social Skills

Interviewees explained that the community service experience allowed students to practice and enhance their social skills. The social skills presented in this section complement those interpersonal skills described in earlier sections. Students built social development skills by a) broadening social networks, and b) practicing building trust and rapport.

Broadening social networks. As noted earlier, the service experience allowed students to meet and interact with new people including the Project Impact facilitators, mentors, and professionals at the service sites. Moreover, in one high school in particular, because of the

design of the service project, students had an opportunity to interact with the broader school community. Fort Myers students prepared a special lunch for fellow classmates who experience food insecurity. They engaged the junior ROTC [Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps] students in the lunch, and all three groups (The ROTC, students with ASD, and the service recipients) participated in recreational, team-building activities. The students with ASD mingled with students from circles beyond their own, and interviewees agreed that this was an important component, probably more so than the skills built during meal preparation itself. One teacher noted,

“I think more so even [than] the cooking, I would have to say. And I don't want to get [emotional]...but for me, that's really huge to see them out doing stuff with the other kids. So even more than the cooking and all that, that was really great.”

There was also an emerging sense of reciprocity in these new friendships. A teacher said, “It's cool to see, for example, our students with the group of students that we identified to help...[They] consequently helped us a lot...And now you see a whole social piece on both ends.” Together, the students with ASD, the students who received the cooked meal, and the junior ROTC socialized while eating lunch and also while playing a range of games and doing team-building exercises. One student also indicated that the new connections continued well after the service project. As he ran into other students from the luncheon weeks after, he explained “ I knew them better, I wave to them in the hallway now.”

Throughout the half-day event, non-student participants were struck by how the interaction naturally broke down social boundaries, noting how much more cohesive the three very different school groups became. Furthermore, the impact of the service project was not only on the service recipients, but the social impact in particular was also seen on all three groups. One teacher described that when they were all interacting she could see that they were sensitive

to each other's differences. For example, the naturally regimented ROTC students had to become more unstructured in order to accommodate the students with ASD. In addition, the students with ASD had to challenge themselves to be more social and initiate interaction with students who were receiving lunch. As one student said, "We get to know each other more. We were playing a lot... You meet new friends and they're nice and it was a lot of fun playing with them."

Practice building trust and rapport. Students not only practiced concrete interpersonal skills, but were also given an opportunity to practice building trust and rapport with new people, the basis for any social relationship. A facilitator spoke about the relationship building she observed the students developing with her. This facilitator described her intentional efforts at facilitating relationships with students by making a point to sit with them one-on-one or in small groups and having them describe the day's activities or how they were feeling:

"I think getting them in that...interaction...It gets to build that rapport. You're sitting down. You're eating with somebody or you're out having recreation and they can see you in a little bit of different light than they would maybe...as a teacher instructing them."

Facilitators and mentors explained that they understood and recognized the potential discomfort these students would have with strangers and new routines, and allowed them plenty of time to adjust. The intentional efforts of guiding adults to get to know students and develop bonds allowed for this development, and appeared to pay off. These small steps created trust that further engaged students when it came time for the service project. One Jacksonville teacher was surprised by the relationships built with Project Impact facilitators and mentors over the course of the project because of how uncomfortable her students have been with volunteers in the past: "So just to see our students building those [relationships]--I see it as improving those social skills to build relationships that fast...this isn't minimal. It's big stuff for me."

Discussion and Implications

Findings show that involvement in structured community service experiences such as Project Impact can be a means for building skills in the areas of career development, self-determination, and social skills for youth with ASD. Both student participants and non-student participants agreed that participation in Project Impact provided youth the opportunity to build soft skills, while exploring new aspects of the community or new ideas about employment. Involvement in community service provided the chance to practice decision making, build self-confidence, create an experience they felt ownership over, and experience themselves as providers of solutions. It served to expand student networks and allow them opportunities to develop socially through trust and rapport with new people and other members of their communities.

These skills are critical for capitalizing on competitive integrated employment opportunities for individuals with ASD and other intellectual/developmental disabilities. Competitive integrated employment is defined within the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) as full-time or part-time work at minimum wage or higher, with wages and benefits similar to those without disabilities performing the same work, and fully integrated with co-workers without disabilities (Hoff, 2014). As noted in the literature review section of this paper, competitive integrated employment is rarely a reality for most of this population (Newman et al., 2011; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). However, for those that do participate, outcome data reveal the impact of competitive integrated employment on individual lives. Employment can improve quality of life, mental health, social networks, and social inclusion for people with disabilities (Evans & Repper, 2000).

Therefore, career development, self-determination, and social skills built as part of structured community service such as Project Impact not only promote access to, and retention

of, competitive integrated employment, but also create a conduit to greater community inclusion and community life engagement. Community life engagement activities may include volunteer work; postsecondary, adult, or continuing education; accessing community facilities such as a local library, gym, or recreation center; and anything else people with and without disabilities do as part of a meaningful life (Sulewski & Timmons, 2015).

The remainder of this section shares practical strategies for transition coordinators that foster high-quality, accessible community service opportunities that promote competitive integrated employment, inclusion, and community life engagement. Implications are offered for staff working with transition-age students to maximize opportunities for future community employment and inclusion. These are: a) having a robust matching and selection process, b) ensuring regularly scheduled reflection activities focused on assets acquired, and c) creating a post-service transition period that reinforces assets and emphasizes connections with community resources. As mentioned earlier, the current study uses a community service approach (versus service-learning or national service). However, transition coordinators can still consider much of the lessons learned in accessible service-learning as they implement community service opportunities that foster school-to-work transition, and thus the discussion incorporate a review of the full range of research.

Focus on a Robust Matching and Selection Process

Given that research shows the lack of leadership roles students with IDD may have in their own planning processes (Shogren & Plotner, 2012), it is critical that the students themselves have a voice in the matching and selection process to maximize the positive outcomes of a community engagement activity. Of the three schools in the current study, only the Jacksonville Zoo beautification project represented the intentional matching of student interests (working with

animals and animal care) with the community service project, allowing the opportunity to truly act as a meaningful career exploration or community engagement experience. To help youth get the most out of their community service experience as it relates to future employment and community engagement, a thoughtful process of identifying the right community service project based on the skills and interests of youth participants is critical (NextSTEP, 2012d; Timmons, Fesko & Zalewska, 2015). This robust matching and selection should be part of any “preparation” phase, as noted in the literature related to service and transition planning for youth with disabilities. In this preparation phase youth are introduced to issues or topics that will be addressed and background information is provided (Roehlkepartain, Bright, & Margolis-Rupp, 2000; Kumin & Lee, 2007; Wilczenski, Sotnik, & Vanderberg, 2014).

Transition coordinators can assess interests and abilities of youth participants as well as community service location preferences through discussions with students, teachers, friends, and family members, as well as the use of interest inventories and informal interviews. This process of robust matching and community service project selection ensures that youth get to know the project well in advance and that they understand the individual strengths and interests they bring to the experience. Finally, the most effective matching and project selection occurs when the community service activity is assessed prior to implementation, and accommodation and support needs are addressed before they arise (NextSTEP, 2012d).

Incorporate Reflection Activities that Focus on Using Skills Acquired

As noted earlier, research suggests that career preparatory experiences build skills such as communication, teamwork, networking, problem solving and critical thinking (Office of Disability Employment Policy [ODEP], 2012), and that these types of skills have been associated with positive employment outcomes (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012). Findings showed that

both student and non-student participants involved in Project Impact perceived the acquisition of soft skills as a result of participation. Soft skills included interpersonal communication, problem solving, taking direction, and taking on responsibility. However, what was less understood was how these acquired skills translated to students' employment goals or ongoing engagement within their communities. Reflecting on the connection between the skills they gain through Project Impact, and their long-term goals, helps students prepare for the future. Reflection is the process of guiding youth to discover and interpret the meaning of community service, often through journaling about experiences and insights (Roehlkepartain, Bright, & Margolis-Rupp, 2000; Kumin & Lee, 2007). Accessible reflection examples for youth may involve the use of creative art projects, photo collages, and drawing to express what students learned (Wilczenski, Sotnik, & Vanderberg, 2014).

Whether discussing hard or soft skills, taking the time to ask youth participants to articulate what they learned allows them to relate these skills to their future jobs and other community endeavors (NextSTEP, 2012a and b). It is especially important to reflect on skills built as they related to some of the typical workplace and community engagement challenges experienced by individuals with ASD, such as communication demands, hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli, social interactions, and organizational lack of structure (Kurtz & Jordan, 2008). Transition coordinators working with youth are also in a strong position to support students to translate community service experiences into assets they can list on resumes and highlight in future job interviews.

Plan for an Effective, Post-service Transition Period

An additional way to apply the skills acquired and assets gained through the community service experience is through a post-service transition period focused on employment and

community engagement (Timmons, Fesko, & Zalewska, 2015). Intentionally incorporating activities where youth apply the skills they learned during a variety of post-service activities will optimize the experience as it relates to full community engagement (Timmons, Fesko, & Zalewska, 2015) Such activities may include discussing when, how, and whether to disclose one's disability and talking about how to request workplace accommodations or support with transportation or accessing community resources. More broadly, this post-service reflection period can also give transition professionals the opportunity to use what the student has learned and incorporate it into a futures-planning process that includes work oriented goals, a gap which has been cited in past research (Trainor, Carter, Owens, & Swedeen, 2008).

Transition coordinators can help youth understand how to use their broadened social networks, such as those developed during the course of this research, to search for a job and create greater community connections upon graduation. Networking, or connecting with people who may be able to help with access to community resources, career exploration, or finding a specific job, is a learned skill that most students need to develop (Fleming, Gandolfo, & Condon, 2008). Research consistently shows that the use of networking for individuals with disabilities is a highly effective job development strategy (Gould, Hasnain, Bose, & Butterworth, 2007). It can provide a foot in the door to individuals with significant disabilities (Kurtz & Jordan, 2008).

In addition to educating youth on effective job-finding strategies, this post-service transition period should also incorporate awareness of the full range of community programs and resources available to support achievement of post-school options (Timmons, Fesko, & Zalewska; 2015). Such activities can increase access and connection to employment, education, and community resources. Such employment-related adult services include vocational rehabilitation (VR) or local offices of intellectual or developmental disability (IDD) agencies, the

absence of which during transition planning is often cited as a barrier to good employment outcomes for youth exiting school (Papay, 2011). Other community resources to connect with to enhance full community life engagement may include faith-based entities, self-advocacy organizations, community colleges or local adult educational options, human service organizations that often host a large volunteer pool, as well as other public entities such as libraries, parks, and recreational departments (Sulewski & Timmons, 2015).

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

Because of the methodology and the project's small sample size, these findings can only be considered a glimpse into the community service experience for youth with ASD. While these interviews provide data on respondent beliefs, perceptions, and experiences with community service as a strategy to build skills relevant for employment and community inclusion, our findings cannot be used to answer questions related to the direct impact of such an experience on skills, which is necessary to justify consideration as a transition strategy. For example, while the findings of this study point to growth in student social development, feelings of ownership and pride, and soft skills necessary for employment, it is truly impossible to conclude the increase in such skills and feelings were due specifically to the five-month structured community service experience. One limitation of this study, therefore, is the inability to eliminate the range of other causal factors such as new family experiences, new classroom content, or other work experience participation that would have also contributed to such growth.

Another limitation of the current study is the limited qualitative data that we were able to obtain from students. While one of the biggest strengths of the project was the inclusion of students with the most significant disabilities who are often non-verbal, it posed a challenge for researchers to obtain qualitative data in some cases. This is another reason for the multi-stakeholder perspective, which allowed us to infer the student point of view with the views of others who experienced the service project

alongside them and who understood the impact as well. However, stakeholder perspectives can only serve as a proxy of all students' perspective and some of these students' first hand perspectives are limited.

To go beyond the limitations in population generalizability of the current qualitative research, an experimental study with a robust sample size would capture changes in skill development as a result of the community service experience. These data would also show what components of the community service experience were responsible for these changes. Therefore, while a greater understanding of perceptions and beliefs as provided in the current study creates the groundwork for an experimental study, it cannot imply causality, positive or negative.

Furthermore, the researchers suggest an exploration of inclusive community service experiences and their impact on skill building during the transition from school to work as a topic for future research. Although not possible for this investigation, a move toward a more rigorous inclusive service-learning approach would match the goals and provide opportunities to access curriculum as well as providing service alongside peers without disabilities.

Conclusion

Employment for people with disabilities is one of the most critical avenues towards true community inclusion. However, limited opportunities for real-world work experiences negatively impact post-transition employment success. The community service options presented in this paper reveal promise for youth with disabilities during the transition to gainful community employment and meaningful community life engagement. Through practical, real-life experiences, youth with ASD gained career exploration opportunities, built self-determination skills, and acquired social skills, all while impacting their local communities. Through the consideration of intentional activities that maximize the connection to employment and inclusion, transition coordinators can support youth to realize their future goals.

Table 1
Student's Demographic Information

<u>Student</u>	<u>Other disabilities</u>	<u>Level of Support</u>	<u>Educational Participation *</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	emotional, cognitive, behavioral	Limited	Separate class	19
2	cognitive, physical	Extensive	Separate class	17
3	none	Extensive	Separate class	14
4	none	Intermittent	Resource	16
5	none	Limited	Separate class	16
6	none	Extensive	Separate class	15

Table 2

Coding List

<u>Background</u>	
<u>Code</u>	<u>Definition</u>
B STUDENT	Background re: student , including previous experience with community service
B EVENT	Background re: community service project (what they did, who was part of the project, role of the students)
B EXPECTATIONS	Expectations about Project impact
<u>Impact Areas</u>	
<u>Code</u>	<u>Definition</u>
CAREER DEVELOPMENT	How the experience shaped what student wants to do for work; ideas for the future; how community service prepared student for work, skills developed) . Also includes responses about service experience not having an effect on career development.
SELF-DETERMINATION	How the student perceives/think of him/herself; level of autonomy in students' decision-making; goal setting. Includes data on how the service experience did or did not affect autonomy.
SOCIAL SKILLS	Interacting with others; making friends; approaching new people; asking for help; challenges in social situations; negotiating conflict. Includes data on how service experience did or did not affect social skill building.
<u>Programmatic Features</u>	
<u>Code</u>	<u>Definition</u>
PF MAPPING	Mapping activities
PF MENTORING	Mentoring activities
PF REFLECTION	Reflection activities
PF PLANNING	Planning activities
PF DATA COLLECTION	Data collection activities
PF COLLABORATION	Collaboration/relationships among players
PF STRATEGIES	Strategies for improvement/lessons learned

EMPLOYMENT Intentional focus on employment within Project Impact- and/or what prohibited this – e.g. students too busy with present tasks to think about link to employment, not enough time/resources to make the connection, etc.

Miscellaneous

<u>Code</u>	<u>Definition</u>
M VALUE JUDGMENTS	Value judgments about experience (either positive or negative)
M ASD	Anything relating to challenges or strategies specific to autism

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