



# Preparing Students for Special Education: Lessons from a Service-Learning Course

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## **Preparing Teachers for Special Education: Lessons from a Service-Learning Class**

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This article discusses a qualitative study that focused on the experiences of 27 students majoring in special education who completed a service-learning course on intellectual and developmental disabilities. In the course, each student was paired with an individual with an intellectual and developmental disability, and engaged in weekly recreational activities exploring the local community. Through their study, the authors sought to understand three main phenomena. First, they explored the connection between service-learning and increased understanding about individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Second, they investigated whether course content paired with service-learning impacted students' desire to pursue a career in special education. Finally, the authors examined the relationship between service-learning and the development of work-related skills in the field. Findings revealed that strengthening the connection between service-learning and special education not only reaffirmed students' career choices but also equipped them with skills to continue serving as educators.

**Keywords:** *service-learning, special education, teacher education, workforce*

Service-learning courses have been offered on hundreds of campuses and continue to be praised by presidential initiatives, local and national organizations, and educators who recognize the value of reflection and active learning embedded in these learning experiences (Campus Compact, 2016). In many disciplines, service-learning courses have actively connected students' work in the classroom with real scenarios and problems, helping students to acquire and enhance skills such as critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and self-efficacy (Bowman, Brandenberger, Mick, & Smedley, 2010; Govekar & Rishi, 2007).

Focusing on teacher preparation, Neeper and Dymond (2012) found that adopting service-learning courses helped teachers enhance their instructional strategies by increasing their understanding of course content, self-esteem, and interest in their career. However, the use of service-learning courses as part of the curriculum for preparing special education teachers in particular appears to be "an emerging trend in higher education that is gaining momentum" (Neeper & Dymond, 2012, p. 187). In an effort to bring greater attention to this growing trend, we explored the experiences of 27 undergraduate students who completed a service-learning course titled "Introduction to Cognitive Impairment." This credit-bearing course is part of the required curriculum for students aspiring to become special education teachers at Midwest University.<sup>1</sup> The course introduces students to the history, causes, health, societal views, educational practices, and transition planning related to individuals who have an intellectual and developmental disability (I/DD).

## Service-Learning Courses in the Field of Special Education

McCall, Alvarez McHatton, and Williams Shealey (2014) noted that “multiple arguments have been made justifying the need to improve accountability in teacher preparation programs” (p. 51). As it pertains to preparing highly qualified teachers, they argued, this topic has emerged as a major priority in special education since the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001, or No Child Left Behind. However, as a result of this increased emphasis on improving teacher quality, a major shift has taken place, from a narrow focus on gathering data and formative assessments to creating experiential environments where teachers can work in a multitude of settings (e.g., self-contained classrooms, resource rooms, co-teaching classrooms, and general education classrooms; McCall et al., 2014; Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017; Neeper & Dymond, 2012).

Scholars reviewing the special education literature (McCall et al., 2014; Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017) have noted that supervised field experiences, including student teaching, practicums, and teaching internships, are a central focus of inquiry in the field and are used to “supplement course content” to prepare teaching candidates (May, Chitiyo, Goodin, Mausey, & Swan-Gravatt, 2018, p. 156). Yet, there is very little consensus as to what defines a supervised field experience, what aspects of these experiences are better suited to prepare future educators, and whether these experiences offer sufficient opportunities to develop the skills needed to serve students with disabilities (May et al., 2018; Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017; Neeper & Dymond, 2012).

While scholars have made a distinction between supervised field experiences and service-learning courses, Mayhey and Welch (2001) noted that, since the early 2000s, service-learning courses have helped prepare future teachers in special education, bridging classroom knowledge with experiential learning and reflection opportunities. Additionally, Neeper and Dymond (2012) documented that undergraduate and graduate service-learning courses in special education have helped dispel myths about individuals with disabilities, not only exposing future teachers to a wide range of disabilities (i.e., emotional and behavioral disorders, cognitive disabilities, learning disabilities, and developmental disabilities) but also introducing students to broad curricular areas (i.e., literacy instruction, supported employment, recreation, and family collaboration). In our review of the literature, it also became clear that service-learning has been at the periphery of the conversation about preparing future special education teachers. More specifically, a gap in the literature persists as very little work has examined service-learning courses in special education as a pedagogical tool that supports “the acquisition of knowledge in tandem with opportunities for application” (Lawson & Firestone, 2018, p. 311). This lack of information about what students gain from service-learning and, more specifically, how it can directly impact the preparation of special education teachers drove this study. Three questions guided our inquiry, in hopes of lending greater clarity and substance to the current literature: (1) How does participation in a service-learning course impact students’ understanding of the realities of students with disabilities? (2) How does participation in a service-learning course with a focus on I/DDs impact students’ desire to pursue a career in special education? (3) Does participation in a service-learning course foster the development of work-related skills for future special education teachers?

## Theoretical Considerations

Influenced by the work of John Dewey and David Kolb, researchers have documented that service-learning is defined by the principles of situational learning (Giles & Eyler, 1994), in which continuity, interaction (Dewey, 1938), and reflection (Dewey, 1933) play a key role in the learning process. To examine these principles as they relate to the preparation of teachers in special education, we focused on two bodies of literature. First, we explored the connection between service-learning and the development of work-related skills. This literature provided a framework for understanding service-learning as a vehicle for individuals to gain skills for future professions. While we did not center on skills limited to teaching as a profession, the literature offered a context

for drawing parallels between service-learning and the preparation of educators in special education. Our review produced five primary codes and 23 secondary codes (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Coding Framework for Service-Learning and Work-Related Skills

Primary Codes	Secondary Codes
Academic Skills	Connect course content to life experience Improve time-management skills Build relationship with faculty Understand different learning strategies Enhanced self-efficacy
Analytical Skills	Engage in personal reflection Ability to consider other viewpoints Compare and contrast different contexts
Citizen Skills	Awareness of societal inequities Enhanced sense of social responsibility Advocacy for underrepresented groups Desire to contribute back to society Affirmation of one's own beliefs Empathy and appreciation for peers
Interpersonal Skills	Ability to effectively communicate Understanding of diverse populations Adaptability to new environments Lead projects and people
Multicultural Skills	Multicultural awareness and sensitivity Understanding of different communities Value social justice Reduce stereotyping Understand intersection of identities

Second, we examined the literature related to the preparation of future special education teachers. To situate this examination, we began by familiarizing ourselves with the Initial Level Special Educator Preparation Standards developed by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC; 2015). Seven CEC standards guide curriculum development and teaching preparation in the field of special education: (1) knowledge of learning and development needs; (2) creation of safe, inclusive, and culturally responsive environments; (3) knowledge of general and specialized curricula; (4) use of multiple methods of assessment; (5) use of evidence-based instructional strategies; (6) acquisition of knowledge for advancing ethical principles and practices; and (7) emphasis on professional collaboration. These seven standards are organized within four major areas of focus: (a) learner and learning environments, (b) content knowledge, (c) instructional pedagogy, and (d) professionalism and collaboration. The service-learning course in our study was designed to address Standards 2, 6, and 7. We decided to explore these standards to better understand the rationale for preparing future teachers in special education. Our analysis culminated in the development of 46 codes (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Coding Framework for Special Education

<b>Learner/ Learning Environments</b>	<b>Content Knowledge</b>	<b>Instructional Pedagogy</b>	<b>Professionalism/ Collaboration</b>
Learning	Theory	Leading Projects	Career Selection
Self-Efficacy	Multicultural Content	Monitoring	Relationship/Faculty
Open-minded	Social Justice	Responsibility	Ethics
Language	Stereotype	Learning Strategies	Community Work
Development	Communication	Problem Solving	Advocacy
Resources	Cross-disciplinary	Assessment	Mentoring
Family	Adapt Concepts	Instructional Plans	Collegial
Intersectionality	Structures	Interests	Community
Safe Spaces	Integration	Delivery	Guidance
Social Interactions	Knowledge	Technology	Organizations
Motivation		Adaptation	Principles
Similarities			Collaborative
Differences			
Cultural Background			

## Method

### The University Course

The Introduction to Cognitive Impairment course with a service-learning component has been offered at Midwest University since the early 2000s. The course typically enrolls sophomores and juniors and is part of a special education program that offers certificates, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees. The course requires that each enrolled student spend 20 hours during the semester engaging in recreational activities with an individual with I/DDs in the local community. To incorporate the service-learning component, Midwest University has maintained a partnership with a local Young Adult Transition Program (YATP) for more than a decade. This program is administered through a county intermediate school district and operates on the university campus. The YATP is unique in that participants in the program are between 18 and 26 years of age. In this study, each student in the course was paired with an individual from the YATP, and each pair was tasked with venturing together into the local community (e.g., exploring the community, completing housekeeping tasks, visiting museums, eating lunch at local restaurants, exercising, attending campus and social events).

The intended special education teacher preparation outcomes in the course included: (a) planning weekly activities, (b) learning to work with school personnel, (c) learning to navigate community resources, (d) identifying strengths and abilities in their YATP partner, (e) becoming a friend with someone who has different abilities, and (f) identifying barriers to full inclusion in society. The course also included specific service-learning outcomes focused on: (a) gaining an understanding of the community being served by the course; (b) having the opportunity to reflect (orally and in writing) about the service-learning experience itself; and (c) gaining skills to become educators who can serve students with disabilities socially, academically, and emotionally.

## Participants and Setting

Midwest University is a mid-size urban research university located in the midwestern region of the United States and has a strong reputation for teacher preparation. The university enrolls over 20,000 students, and students of color represent 30% of the total undergraduate enrollment. Our sample included 27 undergraduate students majoring in the field of special education. Participants were four males and 23 females. Eight students were sophomores, nine were juniors, and 10 were seniors. Fifteen (or more than half) of the participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 years old, four were between 23 and 27 years of age, and the rest were older than 28. Twenty-one of the student interviewees (over 70%) were White, three students identified as Hispanic/Latino, one student identified as African American, and two students self-identified as having multiple ethnicities or other racial backgrounds. These demographic data were consistent with the population of students seeking endorsements in cognitive impairment both at the elementary and secondary levels at Midwest University.

## Data Collection

Merriam (1998) defined a case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 34). We approached our investigation as a case study considering the importance of documenting contextual conditions to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena (Yin, 2014). While critics have voiced concerns about case-study research, gaining depth in understanding is what distinguishes this research method, where a well-crafted design collecting data from different sources can add to how we interpret a particular case or cases (Yin, 2014).

We collected data using a demographic survey, semi-structured interviews, and students’ journal entries. We identified participants using a purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). We contacted, by email, students who had recently completed the service-learning course. A total of 28 students received the invitation, and 27 agreed to participate in the study. To begin the study, students completed a demographic survey designed to gather basic characteristics of students enrolled in the course.

During the winter semester, we collected data through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, each of which lasted between 35 and 45 minutes. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to ask “all informants the same core questions with the freedom to ask follow-up questions that build on the responses received” (Green, Camilli, & Elmore, 2005, p. 362). Each interview was structured in four sections and included open-ended questions and probes. The first section set the context to better understand participants’ perspectives on service-learning courses as a whole. Our aim was to allow participants to describe in their own words how they viewed the service-learning experience. The next three sections focused on the research questions guiding the study. First, we asked students about their experience in the course, with an emphasis on understanding what they learned about individuals with I/DDs. An example of a question from this section was, “Can you describe one aspect that you learned from working with students with disabilities?” The next section of the interview focused on documenting the potential relationship between participating in the service-learning course and constructing a professional identity as a teacher in special education. An example of a question from this section was, “Have you thought about how to incorporate what you learned on this service-learning project to your future profession?” The last section focused on asking participants to identify and reflect upon skills they thought they were acquiring or developing through participation in the course. For example, we asked participants, “Do you believe this service-learning experience helped you with time-management skills? How?”

The third source of data included student journals completed during the course. Prompts for this assignment directed students to complete at least one 1-page (single-spaced) entry after each meeting with their YATP partner. Students were asked to reflect upon their direct observations, write about their feelings and emotions involving their contact with their YATP partner, document any incidents

with their YATP partner, and provide specific examples that connected their experiences with their YATP partner to course readings focused on I/DDs. Each week, the course instructor provided specific prompts directing students to focus on particular areas of course content. Each student completed 10 journal entries as part of the course. Structured and guided discussions stemming from these journal reflections took place weekly in the classroom, connecting the reflections to course content.

## **Data Analysis**

Merriam (1998) described case-study research as an interpretive approach whereby “meaning is embedded in people’s experiences and ... this meaning is mediated through the investigator’s own perceptions” (p. 6). In this type of research, it is important to consider the role of the researcher as a primary instrument of data collection and analysis, bringing attention to one’s values, perspectives, and biases (Merriam, 1998). To this study, the authors brought rich professional and educational experiences. Two of the three authors have held faculty positions in academic departments focusing on leadership, higher education administration, and special education. Both faculty members have organized service-learning opportunities and have identified partner organizations for both community engagement and service-learning projects. One faculty member had previously taught the service-learning course preparing future teachers in special education. The third author brought 10 years of experience in higher education planning community engagement activities, service-learning opportunities, and leadership development retreats.

To manage and diminish potential bias, we engaged in a series of data-analysis steps. First, the two faculty members who had more experience engaging with qualitative work conducted the semi-structured interviews individually, dividing participants randomly to complete this task. As part of this process, all interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, and each student received the transcript of the interview via email to confirm the accuracy of the information collected. To complete this first round of data analysis, each faculty member reviewed and coded interview transcripts independently. After organizing the data into initial categories, we used axial coding to identify linkages and relationships among categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once this coding was complete, researchers gathered to ask questions, seek clarification, and discuss the relevance of emerging codes and themes.

Using the constant comparative method, the researchers, as a team, then identified relationships among the codes presented in Tables 1 and 2 and our initial analysis of interview transcripts. According to the constant comparison method, this process involves incorporating additional rounds of data analyses, collecting data from “additional people, groups, events, incidents, activities, documents, and the like” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007, p. 565). Discussion of these relationships as a team led to a refinement of initial categories of analysis and helped us assess the meaningfulness of themes (Charmaz, 2000). After each initial coding, transcripts were re-read multiple times to determine if additional categories emerged and to confirm coding decisions (Charmaz, 2000). Finally, as suggested by Creswell (2007), triangulation allowed the researchers to compare and contrast data for consistency. After we collected data from the demographic survey and analyzed the interview transcripts, the two faculty members coded all journal entries individually to refine analytical categories. This process began with coding one transcript and then comparing and contrasting notes and transcripts among each other, reaching a consensus on any differences (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Once codes and themes were developed from the analysis of journal entries, all researchers made decisions regarding the relationship between these emerging codes and the analysis of interviews, assessing the meaningfulness of themes (Charmaz, 2000).

## **Results**

We organized our findings according to the three research questions that guided our inquiry: (1) How does participation in a service-learning course impact students’ understanding of the realities of

students with disabilities? (2) How does participation in a service-learning course with a focus on I/DDs impact students' desire to pursue a career in special education? and (3) Does participation in a service-learning course foster the development of work-related skills for future special education teachers? Table 3 presents a summary of the findings.

**Table 3.** Service-Learning Impact on Special Education Students

Themes	Sub-Themes
<i>Understanding the Realities of Students with Disabilities</i>	
Discovering Local Communities	Exposure to local community Adaptability to new environments Seek local resources
Intersection of Identities	Recognize the intersection of identities Identify strengths in individuals Reflect upon stereotypes and fears Exposed students to a different age group
<i>Pursuing a Career in Special Education</i>	
Career Affirmation	Strengthen desire to service-related career Motivation to excel in profession Reaffirmed interest and confidence Connect course content to life experience
<i>Developing Work-Related Skills</i>	
Communication	Develop communication channels
Teamwork	Coordinate multiple stakeholders Enhance levels of patience Balance multiple priorities
Empathy and Advocacy	Awareness of societal inequities Enhanced sense of social responsibility Advocacy for underrepresented group
Critical Thinking	Ability to consider other opinions Compare and contrast different contexts Opportunity to solve problems

### Understanding the Realities of Students with Disabilities

Participants in our study experienced firsthand the challenges that young adults with I/DDs face in their lives. These experiences encouraged them to make personal connections with their YATP partners and their communities, and exposed them to the intersection of multiple identities. These two sub-themes are described in this section.

**Discovering local communities.** By spending time with their YATP partners, students began to understand the day-to-day routines of students with disabilities. That included dealing with



transportation issues, facing social interaction challenges, finding appropriate opportunities for recreation and wellness, and addressing health issues. Participant 21 commented, “I am more aware of things that could be difficult for people with disabilities and it is just different now to see, day-to-day, and I guess I’d say I’m more open-minded about changing things.” Students in the study shared that participating in the course allowed them to enter the “world” of someone with an I/DD. For some participants, this step meant venturing beyond the boundaries of their campus. Reflecting upon this aspect, Participant 24 noted, “I just moved here from Colorado so I learned a lot about this community and ways to advocate in this community.” For a number of participants, spending time in the local community was an eye-opening experience. As Participant 14 reflected:

It opened my eyes to things that I maybe was naïve to or not aware of. I was brought up in a very nice, safe community. I think we live in the seventh safest city in America. Then I worked with my partner who lived in [other city], an extremely rough area to the point that I wouldn’t visit him at his home and I ended up turning around and getting back in my car because it was so scary. So it just opened my eyes to what future students may be dealing with and got me out of my bubble I guess.

**Intersection of identities.** Beyond exposure to the daily challenges that having an I/DD might bring up, participants recognized that immersing themselves in the lives and the communities of their YATP partners helped them grasp that individuals with I/DDs bring a rich intersection of identities. For example, Participant 12 discovered that her YATP partner spoke a second language and was raised in a different country. For this student, these were characteristics that she had not considered when thinking about someone with I/DDs: “He is from a different country, Somalia, he spoke two languages which was really cool.” Such encounters helped students reframe how they approached getting to know their YATP partners, moving from a narrow focus on the I/DD itself to learning about them as a whole person with multiple identities and interests. As Participant 19 indicated:

I learned that you can pretty much do anything you want to when you set your mind to it. Like when I had met my partner. I did not think he was very capable of being mobile but then later I found out he had won a ton of medals for bowling and I never would have imagined that.

Finally, participants shared that age was another aspect of their YATP partners’ identity that influenced their perceptions. This course connected students to individuals with I/DDs from an age group with which many students had very little experience interacting. Many participants acknowledged they had preconceived ideas about their desire to only work with children with I/DDs. Since the YATP partnership included individuals ranging in age from 18 to 26, many students were positively surprised that their preconceived notions about this age group (i.e., more difficult to work with, harder to impact their future) changed. For example, Participant 14 asserted, “I can see myself doing this in the future and I can see myself working with students with disabilities of any age now.”

### **Pursuing a Career in Special Education**

Our examination determined that participation in the service-learning course had a positive impact on students’ desire to pursue a career in special education, reaffirming their commitment to becoming teachers, and providing an opportunity to bridge theory and practice as they engaged with their YATP partners in the community.

**Career affirmation.** Exploring the experiences of future special education teachers in this study revealed that participants considered service-learning the type of course that defined their call as a teacher. In their words, students viewed the course not only as an opportunity to learn about I/DDs but also as a larger representation of what special education was for them. Participant 26 explained

that teaching is deeply connected to service and is an avenue to advocate for individuals with I/DDs and their families:

I think that it makes sense that we have to do a lot of service work because that will be our profession, working with people with disabilities. So the more face time you get with people with disabilities the more comfortable you'd be in working with them.

However, as we interviewed students, data revealed that despite this clear commitment to becoming teachers, students were nervous about engaging in a semester-long process with their YATP partners. Students indicated they had doubts about whether they would be liked by their YATP partners, if they would be able to navigate the local community, if they would understand the needs of their YATP partners, if they were prepared to respond in case of an emergency, or even whether they would have any common interests to build a relationship with their YATP partners. Participant 6 shared that many of these doubts and fears were discussed in class, and it was helpful to have this preparation prior to connecting with their YATP partners:

I think the online content especially and the in-class content were helpful. I feel like before we met [with the YATP partners], the [instructor] told us what it was going to be like and what not, [the instructor] taught us stuff before we went out and worked with them and I think that helped. Learning about the different disabilities, I could say, Oh I worked with this person and he had that, which I didn't know, I was new and didn't know a lot.

Students also found that learning about I/DDs in the classroom pushed them to consider the livelihood of their YATP partners in more depth. Participant 27 recalled, "After reading chapter 12 and learning about community supports and living settings, it made me wonder about [the YATP partner's] future." However, planning and engaging in recreational activities with their YATP partners allowed students to bridge this theory and practice, increasing their confidence about becoming teachers in special education. As Participant 12 shared:

I am more confident about my path because of this course. I am definitely glad that I did it because it made me feel more assured that I am going into the right career and that I got to make a friend out of it by hanging out with my partner. So, it was very rewarding.

## Developing Work-Related Skills

The literature has established a strong connection between service-learning participation and the development of work-related skills (Brandes & Randall, 2011). Our findings corroborated that students overwhelmingly described their service-learning experience as positive, with comments suggesting that this type of learning experience should be implemented across all other majors. Participant 12 asserted, "I think every education major or any career really, every class should have a requirement of an experience or clinical hours or something like that because as much experience as possible is great." With a particular focus on special education, students described the service-learning course as providing a niche to develop and enhance their own skills in the areas of communication, teamwork, empathy, advocacy, and critical-thinking skills.

**Communication.** Initially, many of the students were nervous about communicating with their YATP partners because some of the partners used sign language, communicated through devices (e.g., an iPad), or, for some with more severe communication difficulties, used echolalia or eye movements. Participant 8 described the following:

While meeting with [the YATP partner], I was able to observe his communication system. [The YATP partner] exhibits stereotypical movements of his arms by swinging them side to side and his head, which he moves from side to side while humming. I noticed that [the YATP partner] responds to questions by humming louder or shaking his head either no or

yes. I observed that [the YATP partner] may point, gesture, or mime to get his ideas across and communicate with others.

After trial and error, coaching from their cooperating teacher, and discussions in the classroom, many of the participants found ways to communicate with their YATP partners. Many were very surprised that they learned to anticipate and interpret what their YATP partners were saying, even when others could not comprehend them. As Participant 26 noted:

At first, I was concerned that [the YATP partner] is non-verbal. I did not want to come across as a teacher, but as a friend when I interacted with him. It would be a lie if I said that I was not thinking, What are we going to do together that he will enjoy and that I can interact with him?

**Teamwork.** In planning recreational activities, each student collaborated with their YATP partner's special education teacher, paraprofessionals, and family/guardians. Working collaboratively with these stakeholders provided students with guidelines, recommendations, and strategies for designing activities that were safe and enjoyable, and that allowed them to explore the local community with their YATP partners. Students often paired up to plan recreational activities and viewed collaboration as a means to hear new ideas, make compromises about the suitability of plans, and explore other recreational activities. Participant 3 stated, "I needed to work collaboratively to decide what to do and the teacher would finalize the plan. I often had to compromise and be willing to try new ideas." In the midst of this process, students also observed that their patience increased as a result of participating in this experience. This was a common theme in interviews and journals, with participants noting that it "takes more time" to plan, organize, and implement activities with the YATP partners. Participant 21 shared, "I always thought I was a patient person before, but now, I think I am more patient with my partner's physical disabilities as well as his speech impairments. It just makes me take things slower."

**Empathy and advocacy.** One of the key takeaways from the course was the students' development of strong feelings of empathy and advocacy toward their YATP partners. As we examined the interview transcripts, we noted that these feelings arose for a number of reasons. First, students reflected on their own interactions with their family and peer circles. In these spaces, they recognized that very few people around them knew anything about I/DDs. Participant 8 shared, "I make connections in that a lot of people in my life, I realized how much they just judge people with an intellectual disability because they don't understand it."

This lack of knowledge on the part of others contributed to a number of negative perceptions about I/DDs. Becoming aware of these stereotypes and prejudices helped students recognize their own preconceived notions. For many students, such as Participant 11, this recognition helped them begin to see their YATP partners as equals:

I don't think he's really much different from me. He has feelings. He's happy, he's probably much happier than me. I don't know, I guess that's one of the things I did learn—that he wasn't much different than any of us.

However, as they began to advocate for their YATP partners among their own families and peer circles, students also had to confront the realities of experiencing stereotypes and biases within the local community. Participant 17 reflected:

I see how people perceive us while we are with them [i.e., the YATP partners] and how they perceive him in general. I definitely will be more cautious that I am not being like that, I'm not looking at someone in a different way just because something is different about them or they are speaking in a different language or anything.

As Participant 26 shared, the course itself provided a safe space for discussions about inclusion, discrimination, and advocating for individuals with I/DDs. However, the recreational activities

offered real opportunities to test this commitment. The participant reflected, “[The recreational activities] definitely put me in situations where I needed to be vocal about issues.” As a whole, students noted that the service-learning course helped them recognize the need to continue advocating.

**Critical thinking.** Students were often placed in situations that were new to them. They were unfamiliar with the disability world and what it looks like from the eyes of someone who experiences it every day. From this context, students shared they had to actively make connections between the information they received or interpreted from their YATP partners and the course content. Participant 3 shared:

I developed critical thinking skills because I was kind of, like, taking information [the YATP partner] gave me, which was, like, non-textbook terms and connecting them to textbook terms from class. So, like, things she would tell me about her school or, like, getting a job and stuff. I could be, like, that must be this program, even when she wasn’t, like, telling me that it was that program.

Students also stated that planning recreational activities demanded not only organization and self-initiative but also knowing how to overcome obstacles. Through this process, students strengthened their ability to think about confronting and resolving issues. As Participant 21 noted:

With different problems or issues, bumps in the road that came up during the semester and with time management and everything you really had to think, What can I do, what can’t I do, how will I do this? There was a lot of planning involved.

In addition, as students built stronger connections with their YATP partners, they increased their own expectations around planning recreational activities. Participant 10 commented that she used critical-thinking skills to plan better activities because she was committed to creating a positive experience for her YATP partner and herself: “Yes, my critical thinking skills increased because I had to reflect about what I could do differently to make it a positive experience for the both of us.”

## Discussion

Reflecting on our findings, we noted that students who participated in the service-learning course enhanced their understanding of individuals with I/DDs, grew their confidence and interest in special education, and built relevant skills aligned with their future career as educators. We argue that these outcomes were not fortuitous but rather the outcome of intentionally incorporating standards to prepare future teachers in the course and using service-learning to expose students to “multiple and substantive opportunities to apply their learning in an authentic context” (McCall et al., 2014, p. 64). Here, we discuss our findings in consideration of this important connection.

First, one of the tenets of service-learning is that it can introduce individuals to diverse groups of people and contexts (Aydlett, Randolph, & Wells, 2010; Tharp, 2012). This characteristic of service-learning is of particular importance to special education, considering that future teachers in the field will likely end up working with “students with various needs and disability labels” (McCall et al., 2014, p. 53). In our study, students noted that, prior to the course, they knew very little about adults with I/DDs, had had little or no contact with this group, and had not ventured into the community where their YATP partners lived. Through the service component of the course, however, students became familiar with the lives of individuals with I/DDs and, more importantly, began to see their YATP partners as part of a larger community (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). This exposure helped students recognize the multiple identities—associated with race, gender, ability level, age, ethnic background, language, etc.—that individuals with disabilities have. Vallejo, Stapleton, and Malone (2016) argued that this shift is necessary because too often people learn about individuals with disabilities by focusing solely on the disability itself. Yet, through service-learning,

students constructed a perspective on disability that moved beyond neglecting or minimizing the interplay among these identities.

Second, our findings corroborated that service-learning can reaffirm students' occupational choices (Astin et al., 2000; Eppler, Ironsmith, Dingler, & Erikson, 2011; Muturi, An, & Mwangi, 2013). Considering that "49 states have reported an overall scarcity of special education teachers" (Lawson & Firestone, 2018, p. 308), we believe that creating service-learning opportunities within students' own disciplines can be beneficial and will help to attract and retain students in the field of special education (Lawson & Firestone, 2018). In our study, students revealed that service is a core tenet for anyone with aspirations to become a teacher in special education. Through the course, students felt connected to the profession and enhanced their sense of social responsibility. From our analysis, it is clear that students viewed their service-learning as creating "reciprocal relationships" with individuals and communities (Mayhey & Welch, 2001, p. 217). In other words, through the process of planning recreational activities with their YATP partners, students took ownership of their own learning (Bowman et al., 2010). As Mayhey and Welch (2001) affirmed, that is precisely what differentiates service-learning from traditional field experiences (e.g., internships, student teaching, practicums) preparing future teachers. Mayhey and Welch (2001) also asserted that traditional field experiences prepare future teachers to "learn the skills of their profession under close supervision," but they often position the learner as "the recipient of knowledge and skills" (pp. 210–211). By contrast, through service-learning, students are exposed to authentic learning contexts in which they not only engage with a needs-based assessment of the individuals they serve, but must account for the local community as they situate their instructional delivery as well (May et al., 2018). As a result, service-learning courses offer a suitable method for preparing future teachers, incorporating opportunities to authentically care for the students and the communities they serve.

Finally, in analyzing the data collected, we found that students developed a number of skills through their participation in this service-learning course. These ranged from refining their communication skills, developing their own sense of advocacy, increasing their flexibility and patience, prioritizing responsibilities, and polishing their decision-making ability (Brandes & Randall, 2011; Hebert & Hauf, 2015; Muturi et al., 2013). Our findings suggest that students grew their skills because of their exposure to and interactions with several stakeholders (e.g., YATP partners, families, community members, classmates, instructors). Wade and Anderson (1996) noted that exposure is critical when teachers in special education are often expected to become the link between students, their families, and local social services. We argue that service-learning allowed students to take part in multiple and substantive opportunities to apply learning in an authentic context (McCall et al., 2014). We believe that the combination of lectures and discussions in a classroom setting, planning recreational activities in the community, and reflecting on their experiences through assignments helped students learn about I/DDs and become advocates who understand the needs of this group as part of a larger community.

McCall et al. (2014) concluded that one of the most significant challenges assessing future teachers in the field is the "policy pressure to homogenize special education teacher preparation programs," risking perpetuating learning environments that dismiss the needs of the students, families, and communities served. We argue that creating service-learning courses that align carefully with curricular needs in special education respond to this pressure to continue assessing future teachers while helping them reflect on concepts such as power, privilege, and oppression (Neeper & Dymond, 2012; Yeh, 2010), and honoring their commitment to serve, which for many drive their interest in joining and staying in the profession (Lawson & Firestone, 2018).

## Limitations

We recognize two limitations of our study. First, students were already enrolled in special education as a major, and therefore it is possible they had a predisposition to work with individuals with disabilities. However, considering our recommendation to further align service-learning with

curriculum in special education, we believe it was important to focus on students who were preparing as future teachers in the field. Second, our sample was overrepresented by White females. Unfortunately, this is a limitation that will continue to impact research on special education, recognizing that our sample represents the current demographic reality of the field (Nagro & deBettencourt, 2017).

### **Implications for Research**

From our work, we identified three areas that could be expanded through further research. First, service-learning courses in special education have focused on broad curricular areas and have exposed students to a wide range of disabilities (Neeper & Dymond, 2012). This represents an area where examining how to carefully incorporate service-learning to prepare future teachers in special education might offer rich insights.

Second, service-learning courses aim to address community needs; in this case, connecting future teachers to the YATP partners disrupted a pattern of isolation and lack of involvement that has defined the experiences of many young adults with I/DDs (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009; Parker, 2009). That is, through service, students built a bond with individuals with I/DDs, enhancing their sense of responsibility, developing advocacy skills, and understanding the disparities and inequalities impacting this group (Terzi, 2005). Lawson and Firestone (2018) noted that creating a strong bond with individuals with disabilities can not only influence the decision of undergraduate students to become special education teachers but also reduce the likelihood of these individuals leaving the field once they become teachers. Future research could explore whether and/or how service-learning impacts teachers in different stages of their career and also determine if service-learning influences teachers' commitment to staying in the profession.

Third, we acknowledge that case-study methodology does not seek to establish broad generalizations (Patton, 2002). Therefore, it is important to further examine the contexts in which service-learning projects take place. For this particular study, one contextual aspect was that, at the time of the research, the partnership between Midwest University and the YATP program had been in place for over 15 years. Consequently, if service-learning research is concerned with the impact on communities, researchers must bring attention to the sustainability of partnerships. This is an area of research that needs attention because it could provide a framework for continuing to carry out work that truly transforms communities. Research could benefit from investigating how faculty strengthen these partnerships, how communities change as a result of service-learning, and how service-learning courses have evolved in relation to changing needs in the local community.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, we have highlighted the connection between participation in a service-learning course and the preparation of future special education teachers. Our findings indicate that connecting students and their YATP partners brought increased awareness of the world of people with disabilities, provided a renewed sense of confidence about career choices, and helped students develop pertinent skills as they prepared to enter the field of special education. In conclusion, service-learning continues to play a role as a powerful pedagogy, increasing awareness of social-justice issues, providing experiential learning opportunities, and serving as a platform for engaging with local communities. Considering the role teachers play in preparing future generations, this study makes a valuable contribution, documenting how service-learning can enhance students' educational experiences to prepare them as engines of social transformation.

### **Notes**

1. Midwest University is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the research participants.

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