University-Community Partnerships in Teacher Preparation: Changing Attitudes about Students with Disabilities

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The personal perspectives of a teacher can support or hinder successful outcomes for students with disabilities. With the increasing prevalence of diverse and inclusive P-12 classrooms, the attitude of the general education teacher is of great importance. Consequently, it is imperative that teacher preparation programs work with community partners to provide extended experiences for future teachers to facilitate conceptual shifts and improve attitudes about teaching students with disabilities, particularly students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) and intellectual disabilities (ID). This article shares the evolution and outcomes of two unique field experiences designed to provide future general education teachers with opportunities to make personal connections with students with EBD and ID. These ongoing, immersive experiences involve two service-learning partnerships with an exceptional public school and a nonprofit organization. Feedback from teacher candidates, families, and partners indicate positive outcomes. These outcomes include identification of misconceptions and changes in attitudes, along with additional unanticipated results. The stories of these partnerships are offered to encourage university faculty in building community connections to provide extended field experiences for future general education teachers to work with students with disabilities.

Keywords: university-community partnerships, teacher preparation, disabilities, field experiences

Introduction

Expectations for the education of P-12 students have changed dramatically in recent history. Federal laws and educational reforms raised the bar for outcomes of all students, including students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004). Federal laws make clear that the general education classroom must be the first placement option considered for students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004). The expectation now is that students with disabilities will make progress in the same general education curriculum provided to students without disabilities. Accordingly, "exceptional learners are spending increasingly more time in the general education setting and will require high quality teachers who are willing and ready to meet their needs" (McCray & McHatton, 2011, p. 135-136).

The issue of "willing and ready" (McCray & McHatton, 2011, p. 136) is important. Research suggests that general education teachers hold mixed attitudes regarding the inclusion and education of students with disabilities, with some school personnel expressing resistance (Allison, 2012). One reason for negative attitudes may be connected to general education teachers feeling they are unprepared to teach students with disabilities (McCray & McHatton, 2011). There is also evidence that pre-service teachers feel unprepared to teach these students (Rosenzweig, 2009). Consequently, there has been a national call to improve the skills of general education teachers to

support better outcomes for students with disabilities (Blanton, Pugach, & Florian, 2011). How-ever, "the significance of attitude cannot be underestimated" (LaBarbera, 2011, para.2); teacher attitudes have the potential to either facilitate or constrain the success of students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Cassady, 2011).

Fostering positive attitudes towards students with disabilities is a task that lies squarely with teacher educators, which gives teacher education programs a critical role to play in preparing future teachers for the complexities of today's inclusive classrooms. Teacher preparation programs that serve as national exemplars of excellence provide field experiences focused on diversity and disability, with the goal of facilitating conceptual changes regarding diverse learners (Brownell, Ross, Colón, & McCallum, 2005). Facilitating this change in attitudes can be challenging. Some students enter their teacher preparation programs with firmly established beliefs about teaching (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). However, positive conceptual change regarding teaching students with disabilities does occur. For example, following the completion of an introduction to a special education course paired with a field experience, Swain, Nordess, and Leader-Janssen (2012) reported positive changes in the attitudes and beliefs of pre-service teachers and their abil-ity to successfully teach students with disabilities within inclusive, general education classrooms.

In addition to field experiences, university partnerships with P-12 schools have been identi-fied as an important element in preparing educators to teach students with disabilities (Brownell et al., 2005). Experts in the field of teacher preparation emphasize the importance of conceptualizing teacher preparation as a shared responsibility with a focus on developing strategic and sustained partnerships (Blanton et al., 2011). When partnerships are forged, teacher quality improves (Mc-Cray et al., 2011). Although established partnerships are mainly between universities and P-12 schools, partnerships with community agencies are also recommended (Grossman, 2010).

In support of field experiences and partnerships in teacher preparation, the purpose of this article is to describe two different field experiences for future general education teachers, both designed to facilitate conceptual changes in attitudes towards teaching students with disabilities. These experiences are embedded within one course for general education teacher candidates (TCs) and involve service-learning community partnerships designed to provide the TCs with unique and extended experiences with students with disabilities. The first partnership involves collaboration with an exceptional education public school that serves students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) in an urban school district. The second partnership is with a nonprofit organization that supports individuals with Down syndrome and their families. These distinctive partnerships differ from the traditional course work of general education teacher preparation programs, because they involve immersing TCs in service-learning programs with two very different community settings that serve individuals with disabilities. Traditional teacher preparation courses may use field experiences in general education classrooms (Martinez, 2003), or they may not include field experiences (McCray & McHatton, 2011) and may not use service-learning partnerships (Gelfuso, Dennis, & Parker, 2015).

There are two main reasons for presenting the stories of these service-learning partner-ships. First, these partnerships are examples of how teacher preparation programs can use nontra-ditional field experiences, connected to coursework and embedded within the constructs of ser-vice-learning, to support attitudinal changes in TCs. Second, these partnerships are ongoing; their development was organic and they have evolved over time. We begin our story with overviews of the university course, related issues, and each partner. We provide details of how the partner-ships developed, with specifics about planning and service, examples of reflective activities, and

discourse on the outcomes.

Overview

The University Course and Related Issues

Both service-learning field experiences are part of one course titled *Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners*. This three credit hour course meets one day a week, and is part of a teacher preparation program for general education teacher candidates within the Department of Education at a southeastern U.S. private liberal arts university. This course is one of the first of four requirements, and occurs sequentially ahead of the instructional methods and clinical placements. Although this course addresses multiple aspects of diversity in P-12 classrooms, the primary focus is on disabilities; it has been and remains the only special education course in the general education teacher preparation program at this university.[1] This course enrolls students pursuing teaching licensure in a variety of areas, including elementary, middle school, and secondary content (e.g., Biology, History, English), as well as art, music, and theater education. Typically, the course roster is 20 to 25 students each semester. The content includes overviews of the disability categories under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), and is framed within the perspectives of collaboration and multi-tiered systems of support (i.e., Response to Intervention and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports).

Underlying the more technical curricular elements of this course is the theme of caring and supportive student-teacher connections and relationships. Student-teacher relationships are frequently cited as crucial to improving outcomes for children and youth (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Educators who are able to "first connect with students on a personal level are more likely to create a learning environment that allows students to feel safe, take risks, and meet desired instructional objectives" (Eisenhardt, Besnoy, & Steele, 2012, p. 3). Relationships are also considered a protective factor to support closing the achievement gap (Benard, 2003). Knowing the positive impact on learning environments when teachers and students connect on a personal level, "pre-service teachers must be given sustained opportunities to work closely with diverse students" (Eisenhardt et al., 2012 p. 3). In this particular course, there were no opportunities to make personal connections with students with disabilities prior to the development of our service-learning partnerships.

For many years, this course had a 20-hour field experience component that involved TCs visiting multiple schools to observe classrooms. These experiences provided TCs with a broad exposure to different educational service options for students with disabilities. However, the lack of depth and limited opportunities to interact with students with disabilities was troubling, mirroring concerns shared nationally (Cameron & Cook, 2007; Rosenzweig, 2009). Future teachers must experience direct contact with students with disabilities in order to confront misconceptions, develop positive attitudes, and increase their own self-efficacy about teaching students with special needs (Eisenhardt et al., 2012). It was clear that the field experience for this course needed redesigned opportunities for sustained interactions with students with disabilities and provide the foundation for positive conceptual and attitudinal changes necessary for teachers in diverse classroom settings.

Concerning teacher interactions and relationships with students with disabilities, educational literature indicates that teachers have been resistant to certain students with disabilities (Cook, Cameron, & Tankersly, 2007). Teacher attitudes may "vary with their perceptions of the specific disability as well as their beliefs about the demands that students' instructional and management needs will place on them" (Soodak, Powell, & Lehman, 1998, p. 481). Specifically, some

teachers have particular concerns about students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) and intellectual disabilities (ID). Cassady (2011) reported that general education teachers believed that it was less advantageous to have students with EBD in their classrooms, and this resistance included students with ID and Down syndrome (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003). McHatton and McCray (2007) and Cook (2002) found similar perspectives in future general education teachers. Although there is evidence that the attitudes and willingness of pre-service teachers to teach students with disabilities can be improved, those future teachers still have concerns about the education of these student populations in a general education classroom (McCray & McHatton, 2011). Other research has provided evidence of exclusion and marginalization for students with EBD and ID, as these students are at risk for having negative student teacher relationships (Blacher, Baker, & Eisenhower, 2009; Gunter & Coutinho, 1997). Additionally, African American students have been overrepresented in special education, particularly in the categories of EBD and ID, and are at risk for more restrictive educational placements (Harry & Klingner, 2014). Therefore, the two partnerships that became part of the field experience redesign were uniquely poised to address previously reported barriers between teachers and students with ID and EBD. The next section provides a description of the partners and the process of partnership development that addressed these issues.

Community Partners

Although each partner organization serves individuals with disabilities, the two organizations are not connected. The initial redesign of the field experience took place within the context of the exceptional education school. They serve students with EBD and they were the first collaborative partnership established. Providing opportunities for TCs to have extended experiences with students with ID remained a priority, but it took a few years to locate a partner for this portion of the redesigned field experience.

Exceptional education public school. This unique school serves kindergarten through eighth-grade students with EBD. All of the students receive special education services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and have been removed from their neighborhood schools because a school-based team determined the need for a more restrictive setting for the IEP implementation. In this school, 90% of the students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, more than 75% are African American, and the majority of students are male.

Each classroom at this school has three adults: one certified special education teacher, one paraprofessional, and one mental health counselor. Each classroom is comprised of 10 students or less. The academic curriculum is based on the same standards that students without disabilities are taught in the district. However, in this school the curriculum also includes an intensive focus on social-emotional needs and social skill development. The monitoring of classroom behavior is highly structured via a point system, and students receive frequent feedback during the day from the numerous adults who provide support to both the students and their families.

Nonprofit organization. The nonprofit organization in our partnership works to enhance the lives of individuals with Down syndrome. Their goal is bringing together individuals with Down syndrome, families, educators, and disability professionals to build a community of supports and resources. The organization's staff are involved in many different types of services, including assisting family members in understanding and navigating complicated special education processes and designing and delivering professional development to educators regarding inclusive

practices for students with Down syndrome. This organization also provides community programming for individuals with Down syndrome (e.g., reading club, summer dance camp). The organization is small (a full time staff of two people) but impressive in their ability to make a positive impact in the community.

Partnership Development

In creating service-learning partnerships, a logical first step for university faculty is locating appropriate community partners (Trudeau & Kruse, 2014). In our case, the potential of these two partnerships was not even on our radar when we initially considered redesigning the field experience. The partnerships emerged from faculty presence and work in the community; they evolved through informal conversations that developed a shared vision and common values–a feature of strong university-community partnerships (Torres & Schaffer, 2000). The organic development of these two community connections highlights the importance of university faculty remaining actively involved in the community, because there is always the potential for the discovery and creation of unique partnerships.

Exceptional Education Public School

This school is located in a neighborhood near the university. The first two authors had volunteered at the school for several years, providing free professional development and serving as reading tutors. During our interactions with school staff, we learned that the principal and educators at the school place great value on the importance of student-teacher relationships, particularly students with EBD. We discussed issues surrounding the educational inequities and disproportionate issues of African American students (Harry & Klingner, 2014). Additionally, the school personnel expressed concern about the lack of success their students experienced in neighborhood schools. They emphasized the importance of preparing general education teachers to understand the needs of students with EBD, the necessity of teachers with skills to address those needs, and the critical importance of teachers who have a willingness to teach these students. When the principal learned that we were redesigning the field experience for this course and that the university was looking for opportunities for the TCs to have sustained experiences with students with disabilities, she asked if we would consider a partnership with their school. Teacher preparation literature has recommended extended field experiences in inclusive settings (e.g., Holdheide & Reschly, 2008), so a partnership between a general education teacher preparation program and an exceptional education school, while not common, was worth pursuing as it had the potential to meet the needs of both the community partner and the university teacher preparation course.

The formal partnership with the exceptional education school started in fall 2011 and has developed organically with deep involvement and collaborative planning between both partners. The diverse learners course was moved from the university to a physical location at the school. Since the start of this partnership, the TCs have assisted in the classrooms each week. Additionally, university and school personnel have worked together to co-educate the TCs.

Nonprofit Organization

The partnership with the public school had addressed the issue of personal connections

with students with EBD, but not the issue of TCs connecting with students with ID. Our partnership with the nonprofit organization evolved a few years later, ultimately providing the TCs with another distinctive and immersive field experience for working with children with disabilities. Similar to the development of our first partnership, the relationship with the nonprofit organization started through a community connection, with no initial goal for a field experience partnership. Through informal conversations, we discovered mutually shared concerns about the willingness, abilities, and self-efficacy of general education teachers for working with students with ID in inclusive P-12 classroom settings. The nonprofit organization also expressed a specific need that, in the beginning, did not seem directly related to teacher preparation. Families associated with the organization had expressed a desire for a weekend recreational music program for their young children with ID. While considering this need, the executive director of the nonprofit asked if there were university TCs who could plan and facilitate this type of program. The university did have music, art, and theater TCs enrolled in the course who needed field experiences relevant to their licensure area while working with students with disabilities. Fulfilling the needs of both partners resulted in the formation of a Saturday camp for young children with Down syndrome, which started in the fall of 2013. The nonprofit organization, TCs in the course, and university faculty continue to collaboratively plan and facilitate this program. This partnership is unique, because the conceptualization and initiation of this collaboration developed from a need expressed by the community, rather than developed by an existing educational program to meet a course requirement.

Planning and Service-Learning Partnership Elements

"Strong partnerships take time to develop" (Torres & Schaffer, 2000, p. 102). Both partnerships have now existed for several years, and the processes for planning and implementation have continued to develop and be refined, based on feedback and problem-solving with TCs and each partner. The following are specifics about what happens each semester.

Exceptional Education Public School

Coordination and planning between the university and the school occurs at the beginning of each semester. This includes a) discussing feedback from the previous semester and any associated course or field experience changes, b) reviewing the alignment of field experiences with course goals and objectives, and c) finalizing details of service activities and TC classroom assignments. During this time, the course syllabus is shared with the school staff, with requests for feedback and suggestions. Although the school staff has not yet offered specific feedback regarding the syllabus, they frequently provide supporting materials and resources as described below.

From the beginning, the diverse learner course was located at the partner school in a space provided on their campus, designated as the "university classroom." Teachers from the school provide a detailed orientation on our first day at the school. Each week, the TCs attend their university class for several hours and then assist for 50 minutes in their assigned classrooms. The focus of the time in the classrooms is to get to know the students and assist with instructional activities. While the TCs are assisting in the classes, the university course instructor rotates between the classrooms to observe and provide feedback. The instructor also meets with the principal to engage in co-planning as needed.

Throughout the planning and service activities, the collaboration between the university

course instructor and the school staff is evident in multiple ways. At the start of this partnership, we asked the teachers at the school to prioritize five teaching strategies that a general education teacher would need to support students with EBD. Those strategies (e.g., behavior specific praise) were identified and verified as evidence-based, and they are now emphasized throughout the course and modeled in the classrooms. Additionally, the university course instructor and the school staff continually share resources based on the current week's course content and agenda. The school staff come into the university classroom to share perspectives and resources, as well as formally teach specific topics. For example, when the TCs were learning about differentiated instruction, the school instructional coach sent useful website links, and one of the teachers met with all of the TCs during their class to share how he differentiated to support the reading of challenging expository text for middle school students who were below grade level. Finally, the TCs and the classroom teachers meet several times a semester to discuss and informally evaluate the elements of the service.

We believe the collaboration with this school exemplifies qualities of a strong university-community partnership. First, all partners work together to plan and develop the service activities, which is a "crucial characteristic since involving the community in the decision making process in a meaningful way supports the development of genuine, sustainable relationships that benefit both sides of the partnership" (Tinkler, Tinkler, Hausman, & Tufo-Strouse, 2014, p. 138). Second, because we have classroom space located at the school, there are ample opportunities for communication and on-going planning based on each partner's ideas and opinions (Torres & Schaffer, 2000). Finally, over time, we have clarified the terms of our individual responsibilities and how those responsibilities work together to sustain and grow the partnership as a whole, which is another benchmark for campus-community partnerships (Torres & Schaffer, 2000). These qualities of a strong university-community partnership are also evident in the work with the nonprofit organization.

Nonprofit Organization

In addition to serving in the classrooms at the school, TCs also spend two Saturdays each semester collaborating with the staff of the nonprofit organization to plan and facilitate a camp for young children with Down syndrome and other types of ID. Prior to this partnership, the music, art, and theater education TCs in the diverse learners class had assisted in the classrooms at the school, but they rarely had opportunities to participate in activities related to their licensure areas. Therefore, when the organization identified their need for a weekend recreational music program, an opportunity opened for these TCs to use their expertise in the arts while working with children with disabilities.

Each semester, the planning starts with course content that addresses instructional and behavioral strategies designed to support the young children with ID during the camp as well as in school-based inclusive classrooms. The university faculty, the executive director of the organization, and a behavior specialist hired by the organization collaboratively teach the content to the TCs.[2] Next, the music, art, and theater TCs plan the camp agenda with feedback from university faculty and the nonprofit executive director. The camp takes place at a location on the university campus, and the university faculty, the TCs, and the nonprofit organization jointly provide camp materials. The nonprofit organization works with families to register the campers with ID. The nonprofit organization and the university also invite young children without disabilities to attend

the program in order to make the camp experience less segregated and more reflective of inclusive communities. The university course instructor schedules the space and takes care of releases in order to comply with university policy.

The camp lasts for two hours on scheduled Saturday mornings two times each semester. The university course instructor and the art, music, and theater TCs set up the physical space for the camp. The music, art, and theater TCs lead the camp, with elementary licensure TCs assisting the campers in the activities. When the families and children arrive, a TC is assigned to each child with ID. That TC greets the family and child and takes a few minutes to learn about that child before the camp starts. The camp agenda includes music, art, and movement activities with a lot of dancing, running, and playing. During the camp, the diverse learners course instructor and the behavior specialist work together to monitor and provide feedback to the TCs as needed. When the camp is over, each TC spends a few minutes with the families to talk about the accomplishments of their children, focusing on each child's strengths and abilities. Many of the same children have been attending the camp since it originated and are repeat campers. As a result, the TCs have a second experience each semester with the same children, supporting the development of personal connections with these children. Finally, after the families leave, the TCs, university faculty, and nonprofit staff spend time in reflection and evaluation of the camp (e.g., what worked well, what needs improvement, what was learned).

Similar to the work with the school, the partnership with the nonprofit organization has evolved over the years, providing a second example of how strong partnerships take time to develop (Torres & Schaffer, 2000). We understand the importance of mutual trust, respect, and shared resources (Seifer & Connors, 2007) and have worked to build and support those partnership qualities. We have also worked to ensure that the processes, roles, and responsibilities are mutually designed and agreed upon (Seifer & Connors, 2007). In fact, the camp now runs like clockwork. Everyone has a clear understanding of the roles and processes of the partnership. Additionally, because all partners are on site for each camp and there is frequent communication across each semester, we are comfortable and respectful in our work together and efficient in addressing any challenges as they arise. We evaluate each camp session together and make changes based on those assessments, with the goal of continuous improvement (Seifer & Connors, 2007) in order to ensure we are meeting the needs of both partners successfully.

Reflections

Reflection is an important part of the service-learning process, linking the community experience and academic learning and is also essential in learning to teach. Eyler calls reflection the "hyphen in service-learning" (Eyler, 2001, p. 35). Although this course has typically used both informal (non-graded, discussion based) and formal (graded written journals and reports) reflective processes, we highlight several unique elements of reflection used successfully in this service-learning course.

The first element is the consistent application of thinking routines (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011) to facilitate classroom discussion and reflection. It has been noted that student reflection during service-learning experiences is not guaranteed, suggesting the necessity of intentional efforts (Eyler, 2002). Thinking routines consist of a series of steps or sets of questions used to guide student thinking as well as deepen and extend student learning, thereby promoting classroom cultures of intellectual stimulation (Visible Thinking Project, n.d.). We have found that

thinking routines are particularly effective in linking the course content with the service aspect, and provide a framework for reflection on the field experiences. For example, the simple thinking routine question, "What makes you say that?" (Ritchhart et al., 2011) is frequently used to prompt TCs to provide evidence-based reasoning for their comments when they are sharing interpretations and perspectives of their service. Because the university course instructor routinely uses this prompt, TCs anticipate the question during class discussion and prepare for it, resulting in more reasoned responses.

A second element, and a very powerful example of a reflection tool, involves the use of the routine, "See, Think, Wonder" (Ritchhart et al., 2011). Used each semester to guide initial reflection, this routine intentionally creates some discomfort around the overrepresentation of African American students in the special education category of emotional disturbance and the placement of these students in more restrictive educational settings. As previously noted, more than 75% of the students in this exceptional education public school are African American boys. After the tour of the school on our first day, we ask the TCs, "What did you see?" After the TCs have responded to the initial question, we ask, "What did you think about what you saw?" and then, "What do you now wonder?" Through the use of this thinking routine, TCs have recognized and verbalized that the prominent student demographic at this school for students with EBD are Black males. They begin asking questions about how and why this situation has occurred, and spend the semester experiencing and considering these complex issues.

Thinking routines are also used to structure the formal midterm reflection report. Initially, we used a very open-ended format, wherein the TCs described their field experiences and what they had learned. This often resulted in poorly conceived and ill-written reports. Changing the report format to use the "Connect, Extend, Challenge" routine (Ritchhart et al., 2011) produced more in depth and insightful reports, with content that is useful for mid-semester evaluation and information useful in planning for the second half of the semester. In using this thinking routine, the TCs are asked to a) connect the service-learning field experiences with the course content; b) extend their thought process, how their thinking about diverse learners has expanded or deepened as a result of their field experiences; and c) challenge themselves by identifying other issues or questions they now have about diversity in the classroom.

Another unique reflection piece that occurs at the end of the semester includes a public poster presentation focused on what the TCs have learned and their perspective on their roles and responsibilities as future teachers in diverse and inclusive classrooms. As Hatcher, Bringle, and Muthiah (2004) suggest, "reflection activities should help students not only process the course material but also their personal values, civic attitudes, goals, and intentions" (p. 42). The public presentation is set up like a conference poster session. The TCs provide food, and invite all of the school staff to view the posters and discuss learning outcomes with the TCs. Prior to this presentation, the TCs generate a list of final questions (e.g., What is your perspective on closing the achievement gap?). After the poster session, the classroom teachers and TCs sit together in a circle and use these questions to engage in conversation. The final poster session and the circle conversation have developed into well-established and highly valued aspects of the exceptional education school partnership. This culminating activity helps cement and punctuate the experiences that the TCs had during their field experiences. It also serves the important function of providing community partners with details of student outcomes and providing closure (Petri, 2015).

Outcomes

The following outcomes are taken from TC reflections and feedback from partnership stakeholders, all used with their permission. When these partnerships started, we did not envision the idea of sharing our stories. However, the unique nature of these partnerships has increased interest in our processes and outcomes, which resulted in the writing of this article. It should be noted that this was not an official study, and the reflections were not analyzed via any specific methodology.

School and Camp

Reflections and feedback have provided narratives that suggest benefits for different stakeholders (i.e., school personnel, nonprofit organization staff, and families) and indicate that the TCs' service does matter in the lives of the children. For example, one partner teacher from the public school wrote:

> I love our collaboration with Belmont University because it helps expose their students to our population of students with behavioral exceptionalities who all pre-service teachers will inevitably have to work with and who are likely to be stigmatized at school by both teachers and peers. I feel we are building a more positive future school environment for our students by breaking down anxieties and pre-conceived beliefs.

The school principal echoed the same perspective and commented,

> One of the most important things that this partnership does is to allow Belmont students to build relationships with students with emotional and behavioral disorders. If future general education teachers can learn, first hand, how to support and build relationships with these students, then our dream of putting [public school name] out of business may come true.

Although we do not have direct evidence of the impact of the partnership on the school students, a student's family reported that their child stopped resisting coming to school (and actually woke up and got ready for school on his own), because a music education TC was assisting in his class, forming a chorus to perform at the holiday party. This school does not have music classes, and this student discovered his love of music and performing after making a personal connection with this TC.

Several family members from the camp have also offered comments that indicate the importance of developmentally appropriate programming for their children, designed to meet the needs of children with ID and focused on connections between the TCs and the children. Similar to the parent from the school, one mother from the camp stated that her son hurries out of bed on the mornings of the camp when he is told where he is going. When he arrives at the camp, this child runs in the door, smiles at the TCs, and is obviously ready to get started. TCs who have worked with this child before are clearly glad to see that he has returned for another camp session, and this child has had multiple TC volunteers who want to be his one-on-one counselor. Another parent

also said,

> We all know how important music is in our children's lives, particularly kids with special needs. This program is unique in the sense that it is the only one of its kind that I know of in this area. All programs that I am aware of are based on teaching typical kids. Thank you for offering this wonderful program!

Teacher Candidates

Overall, there has been anecdotal evidence that the TCs do demonstrate conceptual and attitudinal changes. Each semester, there are recurring themes in the oral and written comments from TCs. Because we have seen such positive and consistent responses, we are in the process of planning a more formal process for evaluating TC attitudinal changes.

One frequent comment from TCs is that before taking this class, they had not even considered teaching students with disabilities. After completing the class, they indicate a clear understanding that there will be students with disabilities in their classrooms, and they understand the importance of building relationships with these students. One TC wrote:

> Being here at [public school name] has given me a different and much broader perspective of what a classroom can look like. I hope to take away, not only strategies for teaching diverse learners but also a better understanding of how different students learn and how important positive relationships are. As a general education teacher I know that my job is to teach <u>all</u> students.

Although informal surveys indicated the TCs feel an increase in self-efficacy in teaching students with disabilities, some have stated they still have concerns about meeting the needs of students with disabilities in their classrooms. This is a valid issue, recognized and addressed at our departmental level. Faculty who teach the instructional methods courses work hard to go into more depth regarding key instructional practices designed to support diverse learners (e.g., Universal Design for Learning).

Another theme that becomes apparent is that TCs enter the field experiences with misconceptions and low expectations regarding students with disabilities. Some TCs are genuinely surprised once they realize that they had such low expectations of these children, and wondered how those perspectives originated. One TC wrote:

> One of the biggest challenges that I have had to work to overcome when in the classroom is expectations. Honestly, I did not have very high expectations for the students that we were going to be working with at [public school name], but these expectations were immediately void after the first day of observing and working with the students in my classroom. Furthermore, I think my big question is, Where did these expectations come from and why did I have them for the students at [public school name]?

Different course content, specifically surrounding issues of personal beliefs, power, privilege, and cultural differences, is used to help TCs understand and process questions such as the one offered above. Through exploration of this content, TCs begin to understand the implications and impact of their own personal and cultural backgrounds on their perspectives and attitudes (Garmon, 2004).

There are also comments about how the students are "kids first" and want things that every other kid wants, including connecting with others and learning. After working at the camp, the TCs talk about how important it is to get to know the children because each child has multiple strengths that might not be apparent at first. One TC commented, "I am more aware that students have different, individual needs in the classroom; it is also much more apparent to me how imperative it is to really get to know your students." Overall, we have seen evidence of TCs changing their perceptions regarding students with disabilities, with an emphasis on knowing and connecting with these students and having higher expectations of them.

Unanticipated Outcomes

There are also additional unexpected outcomes from our partnerships and field experiences. First, we realized that our TCs leave at the end of the semester better prepared for diverse and inclusive classrooms through their experiences with both the public school and nonprofit organizations. These are two strong, respectful, and equitable service-learning partnerships that are intentionally designed for better instruction of future general education teachers while also addressing community needs. Guided by our university's mission to engage and transform the world, we plan to be more explicit with our students in how high quality partnerships should be formed and sustained to make a positive community impact.

A second unanticipated outcome was the increased desire from TCs to pursue additional experiences with children with EBD and ID. Several TCs asked for independent studies designed to return to the exceptional education school in order to do more in-depth research of issues that were explored in the diverse learners course (e.g., reading instruction for students with EBD). Other TCs have decided to pursue special education licensure instead of their general education licensure, or they have added special education as a second licensure area. There have also been TCs who have volunteered additional service to both organizations outside of the class requirements. The executive director of the nonprofit organization was so impressed that she wrote the following:

> Spent my morning with a dozen Belmont University education majors and 9 kiddos with DS. The students were amazing. They want to learn and have hands-on experience with kids whose needs vary. After 2.5 hours, they each have a small signing vocabulary, several strategies, a great deal of respect for our kids, and many successes already in their back pockets, some new buddies, and frankly, much higher expectations for those with DS. Not only that, but they then within a hour send me emails asking how they can get even more involved and volunteer with the Down Syndrome Association. And a number of them are headed to a fundraiser tonight. When I was in college, I was seriously self-absorbed – very unlike these students. I have no doubt that they all will make excellent educators.

Regarding the music camp program, an unexpected outcome that quickly became obvious was the importance for the camp parents to have a few hours of respite, free to do things that they normally could not easily do. The following parent comment represents the feedback we continually receive:

The parents get some much-needed respite! I have used this valuable alone time to get groceries, have coffee with other moms whose kids were participating (developing relationships of our own), or spend some time with my typical daughter. Thank you for offering this wonderful camp!!!

Finally, the work within our partnerships is being disseminated at state and national levels. University faculty, several TCs who participated in the field experiences, the school principal, and a teacher from the school collaborated in a presentation at a statewide special education conference, sharing each stakeholder's perspective of the partnership. Additionally, the nonprofit executive director was contacted about replicating the camp model nationally.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to describe two different field experiences for general education TCs in a teacher preparation program; experiences designed to facilitate a shift in perspectives about interacting with and teaching students with EBD and ID. TCs participating in these experiences develop positive attitudes towards teaching these students as they begin to address their misconceptions and identify higher expectations of EBD and ID students. All of the TCs in this teacher preparation program will be teaching students with disabilities during their clinical student teaching placements and eventually in their own general education classrooms if they teach in public school settings. The importance of having positive perspectives and attitudes towards teaching students with disabilities is critical for student success. "It may be that the presence or absence of positive attitudes and a sense of commitment to principles of inclusion can tip teachers toward making or avoiding efforts to effectively teach students with disabilities" (Berry, 2010, p. 76). We are seeing attitudinal shifts in our TCs as a result of their opportunities for making personal connections with students with disabilities, and we are heartened by the ways that these experiences have impacted them. We would have never predicted the current path that we are on with our TCs, the exceptional education school, and the nonprofit organization. We could not provide these extended and immersive field experiences without our community partners.

Eyler (2002) eloquently encapsulated what we have tried to accomplish through our service-learning partnerships to support the field experiences of future general education teachers in learning to teach students with disabilities.

Students learn more deeply when they have multiple concrete referents for abstract concepts, and they are more likely to develop the capacity for critical thought when they are challenged both by surprising experiences and by reflective teachers who help them explore these experiences and question their fundamental assumptions about the world (p. 520-521).

After examining this work, we are pleased that with these two service-learning partnerships, we are able to extend our work to improve outcomes for our teacher candidates and the participating students and families. Through this work, we have reached the minds and hearts of our TCs and supported community needs. We hope that these examples provide ideas and inspiration to others who may be considering exploring such partnerships.

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Notes

1. Our Department of Education understands the issues and challenges of currently having only one designated special education course in the general education licensure program, given the national focus on inclusion and the complexities of teaching students with disabilities. At the time of writing this manuscript, our department has been working on a redesign of the teacher preparation program with the community partnerships at the center of this work.

2. The nonprofit executive director actually meets with the TCs before the camp when she is available. The behavior specialist provides instruction and support during the camp.

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