

# Incorporating Service-Learning in Special Education Coursework: Experiences of University Faculty

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Lance S. Neeper<sup>1</sup>  and Stacy K. Dymond<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to determine how service-learning (SL) is used by special education faculty in higher education courses. Participants were 13 special education faculty with documented expertise in SL pedagogy. Sources of data included a demographic questionnaire, a semistructured interview, and course documents. Interviews were analyzed using a content analysis procedure, and course documents were reviewed to confirm interpretations of interview data. Findings describe course types, topics, and enrollment; course elements; types of SL projects; course delivery methods; and selection of community partners. Faculty shared similar definitions and understanding of SL; however, they used SL differently to purposefully meet specific course and programmatic needs.

## Keywords

service-learning, community engagement, special education, teacher education, disability

In higher education, service-learning (SL) is often considered to be a form of community engagement. In recent years, there has been a push toward clearly distinguishing SL from other forms of community engagement without limiting its flexibility as pedagogy. Perhaps the most widely referenced definition of SL in higher education is that of Bringle and Hatcher (1995) who define it as a

course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. (p. 112)

The effort to clearly define SL as distinct pedagogy from other forms of community

engagement (e.g., community service, student teaching) is evident in the teacher education literature. Anderson (1998) stated that community service focuses solely on service, and the main beneficiary of the service is the community, whereas field-based practicum (e.g., student teaching) focuses solely on learning, and the main beneficiary is the pre-service teacher. In SL, pre-service teachers provide a service to the community that is directly related to their own learning goals in an effort to benefit both the pre-service teacher and community equally.

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<sup>1</sup>Keene State College, NH, USA

<sup>2</sup>University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Lance S. Neeper, Keene State College, 229 Main St., Keene, NH 03435-1506, USA.

Email: lance.neeper@keene.edu

SL as a pedagogy is extremely flexible (i.e., duration of service, course objectives, service location) in its implementation, and as a result, it may look vastly different across courses, departments, and institutions (Butin, 2007; Rowls & Swick, 2000). Faculty incorporate SL in teacher education courses to provide students access to communities, expose students to diversity issues, and enhance personal and social growth among pre-service teachers (Anderson & Erickson, 2003; Hildenbrand & Schultz, 2015). Moreover, the perceived benefits of SL courses are that they provide hands-on experience with instructional strategies, increase problem-solving skills, and help solidify career choices for pre-service teachers (Ahmad et al., 2016; Potthoff et al., 2000; Root et al., 2002; Wade, 1997).

A review of the special education literature shows that special education faculty have used SL in a variety of courses, including introductory courses (Griffith, 2005; Lawson & Firestone, 2018; Lodato-Wilson, 2005; Mayhew & Welch, 2001; Muwana & Gaffney, 2011; Santos et al., 2012), methods courses (Al Otaiba, 2005; Griffith, 2005; Jenkins & Sheehey, 2009), and special topics courses (Novak et al., 2009) at both the undergraduate (Hildenbrand & Schultz, 2015; Santos et al., 2012) and graduate level (Kennedy, 2005; Regan, 2006). Students enrolled in these courses have included special education majors (Al Otaiba, 2005; Hampshire et al., 2015), nonmajors (Novak et al., 2009; Smith, 2003), and both majors and nonmajors (Alvarez-McHatton et al., 2006). In some courses, SL is a course requirement (Hildenbrand & Schultz, 2015; Lawson & Firestone, 2018) while in others participation is voluntary (Griffith, 2005; Hampshire et al., 2015).

SL projects in special education have enabled students to learn how to work with individuals with a range of disabilities and backgrounds. For example, projects have included hands-on experiences working with students with high incidence (Griffith, 2005; Muscott & O'Brien, 1999) and low incidence disabilities (Smith, 2003), students of varying ages (Stringfellow & Edmonds-Behrend, 2013), students from culturally and linguisti-

cally diverse backgrounds (Hampshire et al., 2015; Woods & Conderman, 2005), students from urban (Alvarez-McHatton et al., 2006) and rural communities (Davis et al., 1998), and students from other countries (Kaff et al., 2015). In addition, many projects have targeted specific skills such as tutoring, mentoring, and collaboration with families (Al Otaiba, 2005; Baker & Murray, 2011; Griffith, 2005; Hampshire et al., 2015; Jenkins & Sheehey, 2009; Muscott & O'Brien, 1999).

Although numerous articles describe SL projects implemented in higher education courses focused on special education, only one study has investigated the involvement of special education faculty in SL. Neeper and Dymond (2012) surveyed 48 special education faculty members across the United States with SL experience to determine the teaching activities they perform related to SL, their beliefs about the use of SL in their special education department, and the barriers they face to incorporating SL into their teaching and research. They found faculty were involved in a variety of teaching activities related to SL (e.g., offering a course, conference presentations, developing materials) but held diverse views about the extent to which the policies, practices, and climate within their department were supportive of SL. Faculty cited lack of time to supervise students in the community and lack of preparation time as the greatest barriers to incorporating SL in teaching. The greatest barriers to conducting SL research were lack of funding and the time-consuming nature of SL research.

From the existing literature base on SL, it is evident that special education faculty within higher education are engaged in teaching SL courses and view SL as an important form of pedagogy (Mayhew & Welch, 2001; Neeper & Dymond, 2012). Findings from Neeper and Dymond (2012) provide preliminary evidence about faculty involvement in SL; however, additional research is needed to understand how faculty design and organize SL experiences within special education courses. An in-depth examination of this topic could offer the field of special education a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which SL can be infused

effectively within coursework. This study, therefore, addressed the following research question: How do special education faculty with expertise in SL pedagogy design and organize SL experiences within their courses?

## Method

### *Participants*

Criterion sampling was used in an effort to sample cases that were most likely to be information rich (Patton, 2002). In this study, the criteria for selection were that participants must (a) be special education faculty or faculty who teach courses on disability (hereafter referred to as “special education faculty”), (b) be employed at a 4-year private or public Institute for Higher Education (IHE) in the United States, (c) have experience using SL in their university courses, and (d) have one or more peer-reviewed publications on SL. Publication criteria were included to ensure the selection of faculty who were more likely to have a strong understanding of SL pedagogy and to have engaged in scholarly discourse on SL-related topics.

To identify potential participants, we replicated and extended the procedures used by Neeper and Dymond (2012). First, we conducted a search using the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Psych Info, and Service-Learning National Clearinghouse databases to identify individuals who had authored articles on SL and disability in general. This resulted in 61 individuals. Second, we used special education and SL-related search terms (i.e., SL, community engagement, special education, disability) with various Internet search engines (i.e., Google, Yahoo, Google Scholar). Once a potential participant was located, we reviewed the faculty profiles (e.g., vita) of other members in the department (when available) to determine if additional faculty members were engaged in SL research and/or teaching which resulted in 19 additional faculty members. Third, we consulted websites from organizations known to compile SL syllabi (i.e., Campus Compact, Learn and Serve America) to identify faculty

teaching SL courses focused on disability. This resulted in the identification of four additional individuals. Fourth, we reviewed conference programs from two disability organizations (i.e., Council for Exceptional Children, TASH) to identify individuals who presented on SL in the last 2 years. These conferences were selected because they are the primary conferences offered by leading special education professional organizations. An additional four individuals were identified. In total, we identified 88 individuals (unduplicated count) across all search methods who were engaged in some form of SL teaching or scholarship. Of the 88 individuals, 17 faculty met inclusion requirements for the study.

The lead researcher (first author) sent each potential participant an email with information about the study. Faculty members that responded with interest were asked to participate in a telephone call with the researcher to learn more about the goals of the study and confirm they met selection criteria. Thirteen faculty members met criteria and agreed to participate. Participants had varying levels of experience and represented diverse communities and IHEs (see Table 1). All but one of the participants worked in programs that prepared special education teachers.

### *Data Collection*

Sources of data for each participant included a questionnaire, an interview, and course documents. The questionnaire contained 13 demographic questions and took about 5 min to complete. The interview protocol was composed of eight semistructured questions that focused on how participants plan and organize SL experiences in their courses. Questions included but were not limited to (a) How are the SL projects in your classes selected? (b) How do you link the service project to the learning objectives of your course? (c) When students participate in SL, how do you know they are learning the course content? (d) What, if any, training or preparation do you believe is needed before your students engage in SL? and (e) What do you consider to be the essential elements of a quality SL course? Interviews lasted

**Table 1.** Participant Demographics ( $N = 13$ ).

Demographics	<i>n</i>	%
Faculty rank		
Full professor	4	31
Associate professor	8	61
Assistant professor	1	8
Years of service-learning experience		
More than 10 years	4	31
6–10	6	46
1–5 years	3	23
Taught service-learning course in the last 3 years		
Yes	11	85
No	2	15
Funding for institution of higher education		
Public	12	85
Private	1	15
Type of institution of higher education		
Research	7	54
Teaching	6	46
Size of institution of higher education		
30,000 or more students	4	31
10,000–29,999 students	7	54
1–9,999 students	2	15
Size of community		
Urbanized area (50,000+)	8	61
Non-urbanized area (1–49,999)	5	39

60 min on average. Both the questionnaire and interview protocol were developed based on a review of the IHE and SL literature, and piloted with two special education faculty members with expertise in SL teaching and research that were not part of the study. This resulted in minor revisions to question wording and order.

The lead researcher was responsible for managing and collecting all data. The researcher sent participants an email requesting them to sign the study consent form, complete the questionnaire, and email both documents back to the researcher. Participants who consented to share course documents received a follow-up email directing them to email the documents to the researcher as attachments. The participants were informed that course documents were not used to make judgments of quality but rather to provide further information about how faculty use SL. Twelve of the 13 participants submitted course documents of which 11 submitted course syllabi, four submitted assignment guidelines,

two submitted lecture notes, and one submitted a sample student assignment.

One interview was conducted with each participant using videoconferencing ( $n = 7$ ) or telephone ( $n = 6$ ). All interviews were audio recorded with participant consent. A list of major topics to be addressed in the interview was emailed to participants prior to the interview. Following each interview, the researcher created electronic journal entries to describe the overall interview experience, reflect on biases, and identify strategies for improving interview technique. Responses to each interview question were also chronicled in case of data loss. Participants received a \$25 gift card at the conclusion of the study.

### Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. A professional transcriptionist transcribed each interview verbatim.

The lead researcher then compared the transcription to the audio recording to ensure accuracy. Member checks were used to verify that the data represented the beliefs and attitudes of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To conduct member checks, the researcher created a two- to three-page summary for each interview that synthesized key points. The researcher then emailed each participant a copy of their summary and asked the participant to read the summary and correct any errors by using the review function of their word processing program. All participants reviewed and responded to the summaries with positive feedback. Two participants provided minor clarifications to their summaries. This information was added to the participant's respective transcripts so that it could be taken into consideration during analysis.

A content analysis procedure (Patton, 2002) was used to analyze interview data. Prior to reading the transcripts, the lead researcher developed initial codes for each interview question that reflected key points from the interview summaries. As the transcripts and member checks were completed, an initial reading of the interview data was conducted and general comments were made in the margins. The first reading was aimed at further developing initial codes to develop a formal classification system.

Following multiple readings of each transcript, the lead researcher developed a codebook to organize the list of emerging codes. The codebook included a description of each code, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and examples of coded text (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). A second researcher met with the lead researcher throughout the development of the codes to challenge assumptions and help clarify emerging codes. The codebook was organized by interview question and additional codes were added as the researchers became more familiar with the data (Patton, 2002). Several readings of the data were necessary before the transcripts were completely coded and the codebook finalized.

Once codes were confirmed, the lead researcher organized the codes into categories that responded to the research question. Cate-

gories were representative of convergent and divergent cases, and were based on the ability of groups of codes to stick together in a meaningful way so that differences between categories were clear. As with code development, the lead researcher met with the second researcher several times to discuss emerging categories and understanding of the data. After all data were coded and grouped into categories, both researchers reviewed the entire data set to determine if there was consistency in the application of codes and categories. If discrepancies occurred, discussion ensued until the researchers reached 100% agreement.

The lead researcher reviewed course documents when available to confirm and elaborate on findings from interviews. Variations (e.g., number, topic, detail) in course documents received prevented formal analysis.

### *Researcher Positionality*

We have studied the literature on SL, conducted research on its use, implemented SL as faculty members, and assisted others with its use. The sum of these experiences have shaped the way we view SL and how we engaged in this research project. SL pedagogy aligns with our philosophy of education. We believe that all students can learn and be engaged in their education and community if they are given the opportunity; therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to provide a variety of learning experiences to meet the needs of all learners. We consider the surrounding community as an extension of the classroom rather than a separate entity and that students need time to process and apply what they learn across teacher education programs. We view SL as an effective instructional strategy if it is carefully planned, closely linked to learning objectives, and includes opportunities for evaluation, reflection, and celebration. We do not consider all forms of community engagement such as student teaching, community service, or volunteer work to be SL. We question whether SL would match the learning objectives of all courses and feel that it should be used purposefully. We view SL as

a strong pedagogical match to the field of special education due to its ability to provide inclusive, hands-on, opportunities for students to apply and practice many skills in authentic learning contexts.

### *Trustworthiness of Data*

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that sustaining the trustworthiness of a qualitative study depends on establishing confidence in findings that are defensible. Therefore, multiple measures were taken to ensure credibility. First, personal biases that may have influenced data collection and analysis were identified prior to data collection and considered throughout the study. Second, procedures for data collection and analysis were systematically outlined. Third, peer debriefing (i.e., consulting a second researcher) occurred throughout data analysis to ensure data were accurately interpreted. Fourth, member checks were completed for each interview, which allowed participants to confirm and/or challenge interpretations. Finally, data from course documents were used to verify and further understand interview findings. These methods align with quality indicators identified by Brantlinger et al. (2005).

### **Findings**

The findings describe the breadth of ways in which faculty plan and organize SL experiences within special education courses. As such, use of the terms “many,” “most,” and “all” when describing participants or courses should be interpreted as conveying the general prevalence with which a practice was implemented. Numbers have been purposefully omitted from most of the findings to preclude drawing conclusions about the relative importance, appropriateness, or value of practices identified by the participants.

Several terms will be used to discuss SL across participants in a consistent manner. First, *SL course* is defined as any course that includes a SL assignment for course credit; however, the main focus of the course is not SL pedagogy. Second, *stand-alone SL course*

refers to a special education course that is specifically designed to teach students enrolled in the course how to design and implement SL as an instructional strategy in their own classrooms. These courses also required students to engage in SL as part of the course. Third, *SL project* refers to an assignment within a SL course that requires students to engage for a specified amount of time in service that is directly related to course content.

### *Course, Topics, and Enrollment*

Participants used SL to meet a variety of curricular needs in their special education courses. Table 2 provides an overview of course types and topics discussed by participants and/or identified through course documents submitted. Four course types emerged including introductory special education courses, methods courses, special topics courses, and stand-alone courses on SL pedagogy. The most frequent course topics addressed were introduction to disability/special education, reading instruction, and collaboration with families.

The students enrolled in SL courses included graduate and undergraduate students. SL courses were developed for majors and nonmajors, first-year students, as well as pre-service and in-service teachers. Although there were few stand-alone SL courses, the two that were developed were specifically geared toward in-service teachers (i.e., graduate students who were employed as special education teachers). Multiple participants stated that introductory SL courses were often the first-time special education majors and nonmajors interacted with individuals with disabilities. Participants who developed these SL courses were surprised by how many special education majors had not interacted with an individual with a disability prior to this experience. Two of the participants noted that having introductory SL courses open to all majors served as a recruitment tool for their program because students had the opportunity to explore aspects of the field in meaningful and relevant ways.

**Table 2.** SL Course Types and Topics.

Course type/course topics	Number of courses	Number of participants <sup>a</sup>
<b>Introductory</b>		
Introduction to disability/special education	4	4
Introduction to teaching students with moderate to severe disabilities	2	2
<b>Methods</b>		
Reading instruction	3	2
Assessment and instructional strategies	2	2
Supported employment	1	1
<b>Special topics</b>		
Collaboration and families	3	2
Sign language	1	1
Advocacy and self-determination	1	1
Study abroad SL	1	1
Stand-alone course on SL pedagogy	2	2

Note. Data were obtained from participants during interviews and/or identified through course documents provided to the researcher and may not be inclusive of all SL courses taught by participants. SL = service-learning.

<sup>a</sup>Some participants taught more than one course on the same topic.

### Course Elements

Participants took great care in designing their courses to create optimum learning opportunities for their students. Examples follow of how four of the most prominent course elements were incorporated.

**Preparation.** Participants used a variety of methods to introduce SL pedagogy to their students such as online modules, literature, class lectures and discussion, guest speakers with expertise in SL pedagogy, and the provision of examples and non-examples of SL projects. Most participants used a combination of methods. Factors reported to influence the amount of preparation students received prior to engaging in SL included the type of SL project, the weight of the SL assignment (i.e., points assigned toward course grade), and the extent to which the instructor wanted students to understand SL pedagogy. Although the goal of most SL courses was not to teach students how to use SL pedagogy on their own, some participants reported that they briefly explained how SL could be used in their student's future/current K–12 classrooms.

**Reflection.** All participants stressed the importance of reflection as a necessary element for

scaffolding learning in SL courses. In fact, reflection was the most heavily emphasized element. Several methods were used to engage students in ongoing reflection including written reflections (e.g., journals, blogs, online discussion, written assignments), verbal reflections (e.g., video blogs, in-class discussion), and class debriefings (e.g., sharing challenges, group problem-solving). Although verbal and written reflections were emphasized, several participants underscored the importance of structured written reflections, believing they provided more in-depth self-reflection that facilitated student learning.

**Evaluation.** Participants noted that evaluating all aspects of a SL project (e.g., student learning, community satisfaction) took a great deal of planning, time, and experience. Student learning was evaluated primarily through the use of reflections, written assignments, class discussion, and final projects. For example, students working with individuals with disabilities on a particular skill (e.g., reading, social interaction) collected data on the effectiveness of their interventions and then shared their findings in the form of poster sessions, action research papers, and presentations to the entire class. Several participants also stressed

the importance of collecting data (e.g., questionnaires, personal correspondence) from community partners to determine their satisfaction with the project. Participants commented that they were continually revising and revisiting their evaluation techniques to ensure that their SL projects closely aligned with course goals and current practices in the field of special education.

**Celebration.** The inclusion of celebration activities allowed students, instructors, and community partners to recognize and reflect on the work that was accomplished. Celebration activities included end of the semester dinners and banquets, class presentations, poster sessions, slide shows, and video documentaries; however, participants stressed the importance of acknowledging progress along the way. Methods for acknowledging progress included having students compare their current reflections to entries before they started the project, reviewing progress monitoring data, and developing progress reports for community partners. Multiple participants required students to provide community partners with a formal “thank you” card, which often included artifacts (e.g., photos, personal stories) from their experience.

### *Type of SL Project*

Three classifications of SL projects emerged from the data including: (a) student-directed, (b) instructor-directed, and (c) codirected. Factors such as course goals, class size, and access to community partners appeared to play a role in how projects were structured.

**Student-directed.** Student-directed SL projects are defined as projects students initiate and develop on their own or in groups. Using guidelines from the instructor, students were responsible for recruiting a community partner and then working with that partner to establish and achieve a shared goal. In some instances, instructors defined the type of individuals (e.g., community agency, family) with whom students should partner, and students recruited a partner within these parameters. Project

proposals were often used to guide students through the project to ensure alignment with course goals, and promote positive outcomes for both community partners and students. Typically, participants did not directly observe their students in the community due to the geographic diversity of the settings.

In student-directed SL projects, students had substantial control and ownership of the project; therefore, they were able to easily pursue an area of interest and capitalize on their own strengths. Student-directed SL projects appear to align with introductory level courses because the goals of the course often focus on exposure, attitudes, and perceptions of disability that are more global than skill specific. These courses typically included a range of students from various disciplines (in and out of teacher education), which allowed students with diverse interests and expertise to work together. Although most student-directed SL projects were linked to “introduction to disability” and “introduction to special education” courses, three non-introductory courses utilized them as well. Two courses focused on assessment and instructional strategies, and one course addressed collaboration. In these courses, participants taught in-service teachers to develop SL projects that included their K–12 students so that teachers left the course with the ability to develop and implement quality SL projects independently.

**Instructor-directed.** Instructor-directed SL projects are defined as projects that instructors initiate with a community partner. Instructors recruited the community partner and worked with the partner to establish a shared goal. Students assisted the community partner to achieve the goal. Project proposals were not required because the instructor was responsible for developing the SL project; however, needs assessments were often used to determine authentic needs of the community partner. Typically, instructors directly observed students in the community and often participated in the SL project to some degree with their students.

Instructor-directed SL projects gave the instructor more control over the projects and

experience, allowing all students to engage in the same or similar type of service. Instructors facilitated student ownership by allowing students to take control of certain aspects of the project (e.g., planning the celebration) and incorporating student choice within projects. Instructor-directed projects were mostly used in courses that focused on a specific topic or skill. Several examples of instructor-directed SL projects emerged from the data pertaining to the course topics of advocacy and self-determination, supported employment, sign language, and reading instruction. Out of the four “introduction to disability” and “introduction to special education” courses discussed, only one utilized an instructor-directed SL project. This instructor created multiple projects within the course, which allowed students to choose a project of interest while receiving a structured service experience developed by the instructor.

*Codirected.* Codirected SL projects are defined as SL projects that contain two phases of development. The first phase involves the instructor recruiting community partners and the second phase involves the students collaborating with their assigned community partner to develop a mutually beneficial SL project that meets course guidelines. In codirected SL projects, instructors controlled with whom their students interacted; however, the students had control and ownership over the projects and how they were implemented. Codirected SL projects allowed students to have increased autonomy and share similarities and differences across their experiences that revolved around the same focus. These projects appeared to work well in courses that involved partnering with individuals or groups that had differing needs (e.g., families, individuals with intellectual disabilities) because the projects are flexible.

### *Course Delivery Methods*

Three forms of course delivery were used including face-to-face, online, and hybrid (i.e., a mixture of online and face-to-face). It is unclear whether faculty selected these meth-

ods to best match their SL projects or adapted their SL projects to align with the course structure. The vast majority of SL courses used face-to-face methods while only two were delivered online and one used a hybrid format. Face-to-face SL courses met during set times on campus; however, depending on the type of SL project selected, the instructor might meet students at an alternative location to work with a community partner. Face-to-face SL courses typically began with an introduction to SL pedagogy before students began to develop or engage in their projects.

Two participants introduced SL pedagogy in their online courses using student-directed SL projects. They believed that online SL courses provided students exposure to SL pedagogy that would not otherwise be possible. Students enrolled in online SL courses completed online modules, readings, and discussions about SL that outlined and defined SL pedagogy, best practices, and how to effectively include individuals with disabilities in SL projects. They then developed projects that involved individuals with disabilities in their schools and communities. In both online courses, an emphasis was placed on developing SL projects that included persons with disabilities in completing the service alongside their peers without disabilities. One of the participants had each student (i.e., in-service special educators) develop a proposal that was approved by the instructor and the student’s building administrator prior to implementation. Both participants required a variety of artifacts (e.g., student data, pictures, videos, presentations) to be submitted in an effort to ensure completion and quality.

One participant introduced SL pedagogy using a hybrid course that included both face-to-face meetings and online sessions. The course focused on in-service special educators who developed student-directed SL projects at their home schools. The hybrid format allowed the instructor to provide instruction related to SL pedagogy and develop a learning community during the face-to-face sessions that carried over to the online sessions. In addition, the online portion of the course provided opportunities for students (i.e., in-service special

educators) from different communities to freely share their experiences throughout the process so that fellow students and the instructor could learn about their progress and offer ideas and support as needed. Proposals were required by the instructor in an effort to ensure quality.

### **Selection of Community Partners**

Strong community partnerships and collaboration were deemed crucial to the development of quality SL projects. Some participants cultivated long-term partnerships with one community partner, some had students identify their own community partners, and some used a combination of both methods. Community partners included local school districts, families, individuals with varying disabilities of all ages, and community agencies focused on disability issues.

Community partnerships were formed in different ways; however, most partnerships evolved naturally from participants' previous work with individuals and organizations that shared similar ideals and goals. In two instances, participants reported a community member had initiated a partnership with them by suggesting they work together to help individuals with disabilities become more engaged in the community. A few participants also noted that community partners that had previously been involved in a student-directed SL project contacted them and expressed interest in being included in future SL projects.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this investigation was to determine how special education faculty with expertise in SL pedagogy design and organize SL experiences within their courses. Participants reported using SL to address a wide variety of course topics directed toward students at the undergraduate and graduate levels, first year students, special education majors and nonmajors, and pre-service and in-service teachers. Course elements commonly identified across participants included preparation, reflection, evaluation, and cele-

bration. Three types of SL projects emerged including student-directed, instructor-directed, and codirected. These projects were incorporated in courses that were taught primarily through face-to-face instruction, although participants also used SL in online and hybrid courses. Most SL projects were reported to emerge from participants' existing connections with individuals or organizations in the community.

### **Service Learning as Pedagogy**

Participants employed SL to meet specific goals within their courses and programs. Goals targeted varied greatly across participants, including such diverse curricular objectives as enhancing the use of a specific reading or assessment strategy, promoting interactions with parents or individuals with disabilities, and exposing university students to the field of special education for the first time. SL is often referred to as a *flexible pedagogy* because it can be used in a wide range of disciplines, include a wide range of students, and address a wide range of curricular and community needs (Butin, 2007). The results from this investigation support the notion of flexibility in terms of use and implementation; however, participants who developed SL courses were very deliberate in their design, and developed SL projects in an effort to achieve specific outcomes through constant evaluation and revision.

Despite the diverse goals targeted within SL courses, commonalities were present regarding course elements participants considered essential. These elements centered on preparation, reflection, evaluation, and celebration. The professional literature acknowledges these elements as central to promoting quality projects that result in both student learning and meaningful service to the community (see Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Mayhew & Welch, 2001; National Youth Leadership Council, 2008; Nepper & Dymond, 2012). Other elements frequently mentioned in the literature (e.g., meaningful curriculum, link to the curriculum, student voice/ownership, community partnerships) were described

in less detail, likely due to the study's broader focus on how faculty design and organize SL experiences rather than the course elements faculty consider essential.

A second commonality among participants was their selection of *direct* SL projects. In general, direct SL projects are defined as projects that involve face-to-face interaction with community participants, and indirect projects include projects that have little to no interaction with community partners (Rowls & Swick, 2000). Although participants may have employed indirect projects that were not discussed, it appears that direct involvement with community partners was highly valued. This is not surprising given course goals often focused on skill acquisition, changes in perceptions, and advocacy while working alongside persons with disabilities. Most examples of special education SL courses in the literature likewise describe direct SL projects (see Hampshire et al., 2015; Lawson & Firestone, 2018; Santos et al., 2012), suggesting that these types of projects may lend themselves well to special education courses.

An unexpected outcome of this investigation was the emergence of three classifications of SL projects: (a) student-directed, (b) instructor-directed, and (c) codirected. These classifications reinforce the flexibility of SL pedagogy, but more importantly, they illustrate how faculty purposefully make decisions about student involvement in SL based on specific course variables such as course goals, class size, and the amount of faculty support needed for student success. Although many SL projects implemented by special education faculty have been described in the literature, few clearly depict faculty and student roles, making it difficult to understand how decisions are made about project selection and structure. Articles that do clarify roles appear to emphasize either an instructor-directed approach (see Griffith, 2005; Hampshire et al., 2015; Novak et al., 2009) or a codirected approach (see Gaffney et al., 2011; Santos et al., 2012) rather than a student-directed approach.

Differences in project classification (i.e., student, instructor, or codirected) and course goals likely accounted for the variety of com-

munity partners represented in the SL projects participants described. These partners included K–12 schools, adults with disabilities, community agencies, and families. Although a survey conducted by Anderson and Erickson (2003) of over 500 teacher education programs revealed the majority of SL projects implemented in teacher education programs are school-based (i.e., occur within K–12 settings or include K–12 students), much of the research in special education supports selection of a broader array of community partners (see Gaffney et al., 2011; Hampshire et al., 2015; Lawson & Firestone, 2018; Novak et al., 2009; Santos et al., 2012). The nature of special education, which places value on families, student participation, advocacy, inclusion, and preparation for adulthood, may explain the use of non-school-based SL projects within special education SL courses. It is also possible that the focus on individualization within special education lends itself well to exploring disability across the lifespan in multiple contexts.

Providing multiple opportunities for pre-service teachers to apply their skills across contexts is paramount to a sound teacher education program (Grossman et al., 2009). Recognition of the importance of repeated application-based learning opportunities has resulted in an increased emphasis placed on clinical experiences in the field of teacher education (Rock et al., 2016). SL offers one potential avenue for increasing the number of quality application-based experiences teacher education programs are able to offer outside of typical school placements. Moreover, SL courses may provide clinical experiences that more closely align with the field of special education and the range of skills and dispositions needed by special educators that are often difficult to provide in typical school settings. For example, teacher and family collaboration may be better informed through a SL course that pairs pre-service teachers with families. Similarly, a course on transition could be enhanced by working with disability advocates who have lived experiences and valuable insights into what the transition to positive postsecondary outcomes entails. In addition,

teacher education programs are required to give their candidates opportunities to work with diverse populations. For example, faculty could determine the needs of their students and then partner with community members (e.g., schools, families, advocacy groups) to establish shared goals. Purposefully developed SL courses may present learning opportunities that lead to changes in perceptions and positive outcomes for all stakeholders when reciprocal SL projects are established.

The findings from this study provide preliminary evidence that special education faculty view SL as an effective pedagogy that adds value to their courses and student learning. In fact, many participants reported using SL projects as a means to introduce first-year students and nonmajors to the field of special education and disability-related issues. Their experiences suggest that well planned and carefully constructed SL projects may serve as a powerful recruitment tool for attracting more students to the field of special education. This finding is supported by Lawson and Firestone (2018) who found contact with a person with a disability during a SL project positively influenced undergraduate students' interest in entering the field of special education. Given documented teacher shortages in special education (Boe & Cook, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2017), faculty may find it worthy to consider SL courses as a potential strategy for enticing students to consider a career in special education.

### *Limitations*

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this investigation. First, the participants in this study were strong SL advocates and thus their responses may have been guided by their desire to convey quality SL implementation rather than accurately describing their own practices. Second, although we used several methods to identify SL faculty, we likely did not identify all faculty who met inclusion criteria. Conducting a search for faculty across a broader array of special education confer-

ences or asking participants to nominate additional faculty may have increased the number of participants identified. Third, university faculty who implemented SL but did not have peer reviewed publications on SL were excluded from the study. Their experiences with using SL may differ from the participants. Fourth, semistructured interviews were conducted which may have prevented participants from freely sharing their SL experiences or opinions. Finally, although there were several measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the results were interpreted through the lens of the investigators whose philosophy of education aligns with SL pedagogy. The findings from this study supported our beliefs about SL, thus we were not challenged to consider negative evidence in our data analysis.

### *Recommendations for Teacher Education*

The findings from this study offer insights into how special education faculty can infuse SL into existing teacher education programs. They also provide a framework for thinking about the types of special education courses that lend themselves to SL, methods for creating and structuring projects, and the breadth of potential community partners to consider. As a starting point, special education faculty should review their programs for needed clinical experiences that may be supported through SL projects. Mapping out existing experiences and areas to build upon may provide a gateway for SL implementation. Once key areas are identified, brainstorming project options such as direct versus indirect service or student-directed versus instructor-directed SL projects should be considered to develop the most beneficial experience. SL can be applied across courses and delivery method types including online courses so faculty should not feel restricted by their program structure. As faculty narrow down potential projects, they should look at preexisting community collaborations or connections that may lend themselves to quality SL partnerships. Once SL course preparation begins, faculty should ensure that SL ele-

ments such as evaluation, reflection, and celebration are infused throughout the course in an effort to increase positive learning outcomes and experiences for all stakeholders.

This exploratory study offers a glimpse into practices employed in university-level special education SL courses, thus several directions are available for future research in this area. First, to enhance understanding of SL practices in special education coursework, researchers are encouraged to include clear descriptions of SL projects using the descriptors laid out in this study (i.e., types, topics, and enrollment; course elements; types of SL projects; course delivery methods; and selection of community partners) when disseminating research findings. Second, future research should investigate the experiences of special education faculty who implement SL courses but have not published on SL pedagogy to determine whether their use of SL differs from faculty in this study. Third, future studies should investigate the benefits and barriers to implementing SL courses in special education, and the factors that motivate faculty to offer SL courses. Finally, additional research is needed to explore methods for including SL pedagogy within pre-service teacher education programs in an effort to better understand how to best prepare future educators to meet the demands of the profession.

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### ORCID iD

Lance S. Neeper  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0907-2871>

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### Author Biography

**Lance S. Neeper** is an assistant professor of special education at Keene State College. His research focuses on student engagement in authentic learning experiences and inclusive practices.

**Stacy K. Dymond** is a professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research focuses on curriculum and instruction for students with severe intellectual disabilities in inclusive school and community settings.