

**My Fears Were Irrational:  
Transforming Conceptions of Disability in Teacher Education through  
Service Learning**

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**Abstract**

When integrated into pre-service education programs, service learning has the potential to influence teacher candidates' pedagogy, professional dispositions, commitment to teaching, and sensitivity to student differences. Teacher candidates may make biased assumptions about an individual with a particular disability label based upon what they think they know about all students with that particular label, rather than what they actually know about that particular student as an individual. When used in the context of inclusive education, service learning has been shown to promote critical thinking, the understanding of the social context of disability, and more reflective teaching. In this project, service learning is used as a primary vehicle for influencing pre-service teacher candidates' beliefs about teaching students with developmental disabilities.

Keywords: Service Learning, Inclusion, Disability Studies in Education, Perceptions, Teacher Education

## **Introduction**

In the American education system, pre-service teacher education programs serve as an important multi-year break between a teacher candidate's time in P-12 education as a student and their re-entry into that same system as an educator. Teacher candidates emerge from their own P-12 education programs with understandings of teaching and learning that have been reinforced over those 13 years. As teacher educators, we must take advantage of this opportunity to understand and analyze teacher candidates' preconceptions of education and provide them with opportunities to challenge and change their views about teaching and learning prior to entering a classroom (Bransford, Derry, Berliner, & Hammerness, 2005).

After many years of conditioning, despite the efforts of preservice teacher education programs, it is likely that teacher candidates will reproduce the practices of their former teachers with little consideration of more contemporary pedagogy (Boyd, Gorham, Justice, & Anderson, 2013; Glazier & Bean, 2018; Kennedy, 1999; Wall, 2016; Westrick & Morris, 2016). This is not a new phenomenon, as Lortie (1975) first referred to the years-long indoctrination into a set of values, beliefs, and practices of education as an 'apprenticeship of observation'. This apprenticeship creates a belief system about teaching and learning that is deeply rooted and resistant to change (Wall, 2016).

Westrick and Morris (2016) discuss the importance of presenting candidates with new ideas that will challenge their assumptions and upset the apprenticeship of observation. Finding a space for teacher candidates to engage in activities that challenge their beliefs can be difficult in today's requirement filled pre-service teacher education programs. Noting the challenges of contemporary educational culture, Smagorinsky and Barnes (2014) question the notion that schools are inherently intransigent and assert that Lortie's findings reflect the

nature of the time in which that research was conducted. Also looking to disrupt the ‘apprenticeship of observation,’ Glazier and Bean (2018) found that experiential education experiences in preservice teacher education had positive effects on the attitudes and perceptions of teacher candidates and was influential in transforming their practice in desirable ways.

One of the areas in which a teacher candidate’s preconceptions can be most limiting is in relation to his or her beliefs about students with disabilities. In the United States, federal special education legislation provides 13 classifications of disability (IDEA, 2004) with specific definitions and ready-made narratives that often shape the way a teacher views, understands, and ultimately interacts with a student with a disability (Algraigray & Boyle, 2017; Allday, Duhon, Blackburn-Ellis, & Van Dycke, 2011; Arishi, Boyle, & Lauchlan, 2017). Beginning in 2001 with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) there was a shift toward holding all students accountable to statewide standards (NCLB, 2001) and the need to provide more inclusive educational environments for students with disabilities had increased.

Many teachers reported feeling ill-equipped to work with the increasingly diverse representations of students in their classrooms (McCray & McHatten, 2011; Szymanski & Shaff, 2013). Giving credence to the assertion that transformation is possible, and in fact happening, more recent research has indicated that teacher candidates have increasingly positive attitudes toward including students with disabilities in general education classes, which indicates that work has been, and continues to be done, to prepare inclusive educators (Goddard & Evans 2018; Specht, 2016). Left unsupported and unchallenged, teacher candidates tend to draw upon their existing beliefs and past experiences in K-12 schools and reproduce traditional marginalizing special education practices (Ashby, 2012).

In order to disrupt the reproduction of problematic practices that may perpetuate exclusion and segregations, teacher education programs must provide candidates with opportunities to challenge their preconceptions about disability and create new understandings of themselves as educators (Lawrence & Butler, 2010). Specht (2016) suggested that teacher education programs should provide preservice teachers with positive personal experiences with people with disabilities to increase the likelihood of candidates believing that all students belong in the general education classroom and viewing their future students as individuals who have the ability to learn and themselves as capable of teaching them. Course-embedded service learning projects can provide teacher candidates with just these types of opportunities, as candidates' supporting people with disabilities in community-based settings can be a vehicle for personal growth and ideological transformation among future inclusive educators (Barton-Arwood, Lunsford, & Suddeth, 2016; Chambers, 2017; Glazier, Albe, & Charpentier, 2014).

### **Service Learning**

With applications in both P-12 and higher education, Kaye (2010) defines service learning as an instructional approach that encourages students to apply their knowledge about pedagogy to real-life situations within a community setting with benefits to both the community and the student. While developing their professional skills, students engaging with service learning gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their community, and society as a whole. Service learning is broadly understood in higher education as a high-impact practice that enhances teaching and learning by promoting the application of course content in real-world settings through community-based service experiences (Bringle &

Hatcher, 1996; Chambers, 2017; Choi, et al., 2016; Kuh, 2008; Jacoby, 2014). When engaged in service learning, students in higher education work toward course goals and objectives through addressing a community need and collaborating with community partners to ensure a reciprocal benefit (Santos, Ruppap & Jeans, 2012). By integrating meaningful community service with instruction, instructors can enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen mutually beneficial ties to communities (Chambers, 2017; Jacoby, 2003; Kaye, 2010; Mayhew & Welch, 2001).

With the focus on collaborative community relationships, service learning is a high-impact practice with great potential implications for preservice teacher education. When integrated into pre-service education programs, service learning has the potential to influence teacher candidates' pedagogy, professional dispositions, commitment to teaching, and caring and sensitivity to student differences (Chambers, 2017; Stringfellow & Edmunds-Behrend, 2013). These are all important areas in need of attention, as teacher candidates may make biased assumptions about an individual with a particular disability classification based upon what they think they know about all students with that particular label, rather than what they actually know about that particular student as an individual and consequently engage in marginalizing and exclusive educational practices (Ashby, 2012; Carrington, Mercer, Iyer, & Selva, 2015).

In the context of inclusive education, service learning promotes critical thinking, the understanding of the social context of disability, and more reflective teaching (Barton-Arwood, Lunsford, & Suddeth, 2016; Carrington & Selva, 2010; Chambers, 2017). Barton-Arwood, Lunsford, and Suddeth (2016) found that teacher candidates developed positive attitudes towards teaching students with disabilities after making personal connections with

students with disabilities through service learning experiences in their preservice programs. In addition to an increase in positive attitudes among teacher candidates engaged in service learning, Chambers (2017) found candidates had a deeper understanding of inclusion and great confidence in their ability to intentionally seek out inclusive educational experiences.

Although service learning can conjure images of volunteerism and community service, when implemented with attention to curricular ties and reciprocity, the high-impact practice can be a vehicle for transformation and social justice. Chambers and Lavery (2017) identify service learning as a means for changing preservice teachers' beliefs about disability, which consequently would promote inclusive education and improve the education of students with disabilities. Service learning has the potential to inspire teacher candidates to become stronger agents of change as they challenge their existing beliefs about inclusion and disability and become better equipped to bring inclusive education to new levels, thus moving beyond superficial understandings and practices (Carrington & Selva, 2010).

Rosenberger (2000) first introduced 'critical service learning' as a type of service learning with a social justice and human rights orientation. The focus for teacher candidates becomes their own transformation into agents of social change as they engage in a service learning experience that challenges social injustices and inequities within the community (Carrington et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell, 2015). Mitchell (2015) calls on faculty to select readings that bring in critical perspectives that address positionality and privilege and how that influences our interactions with others.

Critical service learning identifies and names the social injustices that relegate certain populations to marginalized status and supports the critique of values, policy, and practice that impede inclusion (Carrington et al., 2015). Carrington and colleagues suggest that this type of

service learning involves students engaging with readings, discussions, and activities that facilitate the questioning of their beliefs and assumptions about diversity, social justice, and the role of schools in perpetuating or transforming society. Disability Studies in Education (DSE), the framework employed by this study and used in the first author's course, is a theoretically and empirically-informed critical perspective that challenges common understandings of disability promotes transformation to a more inclusive and socially just society.

### **Disability Studies in Education**

Shifting a teacher candidate's perception about students with disabilities is facilitated by the use of a Disability Studies in Education (DSE) framework. Emerging from the Disability Rights movement of the 1960s, Disability Studies in Education (DSE) is a perspective that problematizes the traditional deficit model of special education, which prioritizes diagnosis and remediation over democratic education and social justice (Ashby, 2012; Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017; Rice, 2006; Slee & Allan, 2001; Ware, 2004; Ware 2018). DSE scholars find fault with the idea that much of contemporary inclusive education promotes tolerating human difference and assimilating defective students into the normal educational environment (Allan, 2006).

The DSE perspective challenges that the mere tolerance of difference and assimilation of individuals with disabilities into normal environments actually reproduces traditional negative views of disability and perpetuates exclusive practices in education. In this light, inclusive education is not an endpoint or goal; rather it is a prerequisite of democratic and socially just education. The service learning project discussed in this study uses this

understanding of inclusive education to guide students' learning and understanding of disability, normalcy, and their roles as future inclusive educators.

Traditional perspectives on special education tend to favor a medical model that situates the individual with a disability as a problem that requires intervention and seeks a 'cure' (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). In this view, the classroom operates as a vital setting for those interventions, remediations, and 'cures' to take place. The emphasis in most special education settings is on mitigating a student's deviance from what is considered normal or typical, which often results in the marginalization of the student with a disability and denial of their individuality and wholeness.

DSE, in contrast embraces a social model of disability whereby the individual is viewed as a complete individual who experiences disability through engagement with a world that is often inaccessible to them (Ware, 2018). The challenge in education then, is to provide children with disabilities with equal access and opportunities in schools as a basic civil right without considering their disability to be a disqualifying factor (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). DSE does not deny the wide range of ways in which people move, communicate and understand in society. According to Ware (2001; 2018), DSE challenges the assumptions that are made about individuals for whom these differences are most apparent and calls on future educators to 'imagine disability otherwise' to disrupt the reductionist and categorical thinking embedded in teacher preparation. Inclusive education, then, shifts the focus from the deficiencies of the student to adjusting the environment to eliminate physical, linguistic, and mental barriers for the student (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). The first author teaches the course from a DSE perspective and sets a foundation for the students to identify and reconsider their

preconceived notions and prejudices about working with students with disabilities (which will be discussed in a later section).

### **The TIES Service Learning Project**

#### **Together Including Every Student (TIES).**

The service learning project is a collaboration between the first author and Together Including Every Student (TIES), a community-based support program that promotes the participation of students and young adults with developmental disabilities in inclusive, organized extracurricular and community activities through the support of trained peer volunteers. TIES has a presence in more than 30 school districts throughout the Western, Central and Finger Lakes regions of New York state. In addition to those who are in the K-12 public education system, many TIES participants are adults with developmental disabilities who live with their parents. TIES participants of all ages join activities where they can develop their recreational interests, learn about their community, and have fun with peers with and without disabilities. TIES peer volunteers receive training in how to best support individuals with developmental disabilities and gain a better understanding of disability and diversity, while being a positive influence in another person's life.

Typical TIES sponsored events include providing peer support for music, sports, cooking, or other social activities that may or may not be designed specifically for individuals with disabilities. Providing programming options for TIES participants at the college fits with the program ideals, as the teacher candidates serve as age-appropriate peers for most of the participants. The benefits of this college-based program were mutual, as the TIES participants would get additional options for age-appropriate social interactions with non-disabled peers

and the teacher candidates would gain valuable experience interacting and getting to know a variety of individuals with developmental disabilities in a social context as peers.

### **The Course**

The course, Introduction to Special Education, is an early requirement of the preservice teacher education program and is taught by multiple instructors each semester. This course provides all teacher candidates with a foundation in special education law, practices, terminology and classifications, but it has no fieldwork requirement attached to it. With no existing field-based requirement for the course the instructor (and first author) included the service learning component in her section to allow the teacher candidates to make connections with people with disabilities. Through participation in service learning, the teacher candidates in this course interact with individuals with developmental disabilities through loosely structured, social and extracurricular activity sessions. The informal structure provides the teacher candidates with opportunities to get to know the program participants, their personalities, likes and dislikes, and areas of strength and need.

The TIES service learning project is more than a pre-service field experience or a volunteering or community service activity; it is a critical service learning experience intended to provide teacher candidates with new and perspective-changing experiences. The critical work of the course, then, is in identifying the empirical evidence that supports the efficacy and necessity of inclusion, while simultaneously illuminating the deficiencies of dominant approaches to educating students with disabilities. Consistent with DSE perspectives, the first author recognizes Special Education as a professional field that is marked with problematic ableist beliefs and an over-reliance on the medical model of

disability. The groundwork for the service learning project is laid early in the semester with an examination of dominant conceptions of disability and normalcy and the effect that has on the education of students with disabilities.

The concept of ‘presuming competence’ (Biklen & Burke, 2006) factors prominently into the author’s philosophical approach to the course and is explored through course readings and discussions early in the semester. Presuming competence in education means that, as an educator, one begins with the assumption that an individual, regardless of apparent ability, wishes to interact meaningfully with his or her environment and is capable of learning and growing. When one presumes incompetence, standards are lowered; prejudices are free to go unchallenged; and decisions might be made that aren’t necessarily in the best interest of the individual with the disability.

Through the required course readings, the service learning experience, class discussions, and reflective writing assignments, teacher candidates are given space to rethink their understandings of normalcy and legitimacy to become better prepared to be inclusive educators. Upon completion of each TIES session, the candidates were prompted to reflect in writing on their most memorable experiences, areas of personal growth, and general lessons learned. The candidates’ reflections, both in group discussion and individual written reflection are a key culminating component of the service learning experience. Many service learning scholars cite the reflective process as integral in helping the candidates to articulate their personal and professional growth as a result of the service learning experience (Chambers & Lavery, 2017; Jacoby, 2014; Kaye, 2010). As a primary data source for this study, the content and structure of the reflections will be discussed in the Methodology section in greater detail.

**The Service Learning Project**

As a community-based college project, this service learning project requires extensive communication and collaboration between the course instructor and the TIES Program Director to coordinate training, event dates/times, and community participant registration. Early in the semester, teacher candidates receive one hour of peer volunteer training from the TIES Program Director to learn about approaches and strategies that will help the participants enjoy success and make friends in the activities. Teacher candidates then collaborate with each other, the course instructor, and the TIES Program Director to create a varied list of activities and materials to share with the program participants. After training and program development is complete, the teacher candidates host a series of activity sessions for individuals in the community with developmental disabilities.

Over the course of the semester, the teacher candidates host four TIES sessions that last 2½ hours in duration (30 minutes of set up, 90 minutes of activities with participants, and 30 minutes of take down and discussion) and are held on the college campus. Each teacher candidate is required to attend two sessions per semester with a total time commitment of one hour of training, five hours of TIES sessions, and additional time spent in class discussions and writing reflections. It is acknowledged that this is a comparatively short amount of time for a service learning project, but there are inherent limitations in the amount of time teacher candidates can be expected dedicate to this. Since this a 3-credit required course with a common curriculum used by instructors who do not include a service learning component, the service learning project embedded within the first author's course and obligation time outside of class must be limited to that which is comfortably accommodated into the candidates' schedules.

During each activity session teacher candidates provide support as needed with large and small group activities and engage in conversations with TIES participants based on their needs and interests. Teacher candidates are expected to get to know the TIES participants and engage in social activities with them such as arts and crafts, sports, dancing, board games, parachute games, reading books or simply just talking. The activity sessions do not have specific requirements or expected outcomes for TIES participants; rather the sessions are established to provide participants with maximum opportunities to express autonomy by choosing the activities in which they wish to engage. In each session, many options are presented and it is up to the teacher candidates and the TIES participants to determine what they want to do.

For many people with developmental disabilities, their days are highly structured in school, work, or day treatment situations which leaves little time for pure socialization. This program provides just that- time to socialize or ‘hang out’(as is the phrase often used). This lack of formal structure also leaves a space for the teacher candidates to develop personal relationships with program participants as they seek to understand participants’ interests and preferences and provide support in their pursuit of choice. At the end of each semester, the parents/guardians of the community participants and the teacher candidates are asked to complete an evaluation and that information provides directions for the program’s future direction.

The teacher candidates come with varying degrees of experience and comfort in engaging with individuals with developmental disabilities and the free-form nature of this program provides a space for everyone to engage meaningfully with the TIES participants and gain new experiences and perspectives. Teacher candidates with more experience provide

modeling and support for their classmates with less experience, which creates an informal, yet supportive environment. Although the benefits to the teacher candidates in the TIES service learning project have been made clear in the previous section, the benefits to the community participants are also significant in terms of age-appropriate peer socialization. Without attention to the reciprocity, this high-impact practice is sometimes criticized for perpetuating a charity model and not achieving the social justice ideals of critical service learning (Ashgar & Rowe, 2018; Clifford, 2017). Through interaction with the teacher candidates, TIES participants are given opportunities to develop their communication, interpersonal and physical skills in a supportive and engaging environment.

In summary, the TIES service learning project provides teacher candidates with an opportunity to get to know people with disabilities outside of the school context and to challenge their own assumptions about people with disabilities, normalcy, and inclusion as they develop relationships that are based on genuine social interactions and trust. TIES community participants are encouraged to develop their recreational interests, learn about their community and have fun with trained peer volunteers who provide necessary support. As peer volunteers, teacher candidates can learn how to support participants according to their individual needs, gain more understanding of disability and diversity, and make a positive difference in an another's life.

This study is an analysis of service learning in a pre-service teacher education course. In this project, service learning was embedded in an early program course and used as a primary vehicle for influencing pre-service teacher candidates' beliefs about inclusive education. The research questions that this study addressed are directly related to the teacher candidates' understandings of disability and their roles as future inclusive educators.

After participating in the TIES Service Learning Project:

1. How did teacher candidates articulate or revise their understandings of disability and inclusion?
2. How did their understanding of disability and inclusion influence their perceptions of themselves as inclusive educators?

### **Methodology**

This service learning project is offered at a mid-sized public institution in Western New York with approximately 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The teacher certification program at the institution is inclusive, by design. All teacher candidates, at both the childhood and adolescent levels, receive necessary coursework (46-48 education credits) and fieldwork spanning four professional phases to prepare them for certification as general and special educators.

Participants in this study were 28 teacher candidates in the first author's Introduction to Special Education course. Of these participants, 22 were female, 6 male and all were ages 19-40. Upon completion of the activity sessions, and as a course requirement, the teacher candidates were asked to write two (2) reflections on their experiences with the service learning project, which yielded 56 sources of written data for analysis. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted to use the teacher candidates' reflective writing as data for this analysis. As per the approved IRB proposal, teacher candidates signed a consent form at the beginning of the semester to grant anonymous access to their reflective writing. The course instructor did not know who granted consent and data were not analyzed until after course grades were submitted at the end of the semester.

With two required reflections, one for each session attended, the teacher candidates' writings were the primary data source for this study. The candidates were asked to respond to the following prompts after participating in their first session (using citations to course readings where appropriate) (Reflection 1):

- What were you thinking/feeling leading up to the first TIES session?
- What was your most memorable/surprising experience?

After their second, and final session, the candidates were asked to respond to a different set of prompts (Reflection 2):

- How did you feel prior to this session as compared to your first?
- How do you think your experience with the TIES program has influenced your understanding of disability and inclusion?
- What does this mean for you as a future inclusive educator?

All of the teacher candidates granted consent to participate in the study so their reflections represent the entirety of the data for this study. The data were analyzed in two sets *Reflection 1* and *Reflection 2* using a constant comparative method for initial analysis to identify recurrent and prominent themes within the candidates' writing (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Patterns in the data were identified and initial themes emerged through open coding, whereby labels were derived from the language in the written reflections and then further analyzed through axial coding, where categories or themes were assigned to the groups of initial codes. The categories or themes generated from the axial coding were largely developed a priori from the reflection prompts.

## Analysis

The main themes that emerged from analysis and coding of the data related to teacher candidate *misconceptions, fear, presuming competence, and inclusion.*

### **Misconceptions.**

Many teacher candidates expressed their misconceptions about individuals with disabilities within the context of their own K-12 education experiences and the preconceptions that they had about this population.

I humbly admit that I was wrong in thinking that I already knew all there was to know about working with people with disabilities. I first acknowledge that I definitely ‘bought into’ the concept that disabilities can be definitively defined. I learned it is not accurate to assume people with disabilities will fit perfectly into our preconceived understanding of their disability (Teacher Candidate #1).

I learned more about individuals with disabilities in that time period than I had in my whole life. I used to be one of those people who just assumed that if someone had a disability they wouldn’t be able to perform as well as individuals who don’t have one (Teacher Candidate #2).

I feel that it is easy to categorize individuals with disabilities under their classification. For example, one might think that every individual with autism will have the same behaviors, characteristics, or personalities. It can be easy to have pre-existing beliefs about a person with disabilities before you meet them. I can admit that I often did just

that. Before this activity, I did not have much experience with students with disabilities (Teacher Candidate #3).

As important as knowing this information is for educators, I found learning about the student through personal interaction was more beneficial. As a teacher, I will be handed an IEP. This packet tells me everything that I need to know in order to support a child's learning. However, I need to remember that that student is an individual and I can't base all my expectations of them from one piece of paper (Teacher Candidate #4).

It is evident from the above passages that the teacher candidates have considered the formal legal and structural aspects of special education and found that this provides only one perspective on teaching students with disabilities. They have acknowledged that their preconceived notions of disability have been shaped by the traditional special education system. Through their involvement with the service learning project, they have gained a new understanding of the importance of human interaction and learning about the person behind the IEP and classification and have begun to see their own misconceptions more clearly after engaging in this service learning experience.

**Fear.**

Considering the misconceptions that the teacher candidates expressed, it is not surprising that they also indicated a substantial amount of fear in working with individuals with disabilities.

Before taking this course, and even more specifically being involved in TIES, I found students with disabilities to be very overwhelming. After taking this course and going to the two TIES at Brockport event sessions that we planned and put on for the students, I realized that my fears were irrational. I realized that special needs students are still normal students; they just have their own quirks and differences just like any other kid. With the right support and encouragement, they were perfectly capable of participating in the activities that we set up for them, which weren't even developed specially for students with disabilities. They were activities that could very well be set up for any student of any age with any level of ability. I also realized that I was perfectly capable of supporting them (Teacher Candidate #5).

I am not going to lie, when the students first started to come in I felt a little overwhelmed and intimidated. I was nervous that I would say the wrong thing or act the wrong way and parents would get very frustrated with me. I was also nervous that I would not know how to handle a situation if a student started to get frustrated and it would make me look like I had no idea what I was doing. It's a way to step out of my comfort zone, but in a good way (Teacher Candidate #6).

The teacher candidates indicated that they were mostly concerned about being able to provide the appropriate type of support for the participants and respond to unpredictable

situations that might arise. Through the service learning project, the candidates challenged themselves to interact with individuals with disabilities in a new context and the result was an increase in self-efficacy and self-confidence as educators of individuals with disabilities.

**Presuming competence.**

Since the concept of presuming competence took on such a prominent role in class readings and discussions, it is not surprising that it emerged as a main theme in the teacher candidates' reflective writing. It is one thing to comprehend the philosophical importance of presuming competence in all individuals, but to see how the teacher candidates applied this concept to their interactions with the TIES participants made it even more salient and powerful.

Presuming competence is one term that will always be carried out in my future as a professional teacher. You should never assume that a student is not able to do something just because he/she refuses to do so for any reason (Teacher Candidate #7).

Once the student is labeled as disabled and is treated as a disabled person, it can make the student feel incompetent. I presumed that each participant I worked with was fully capable of doing every activity, no matter what abilities they had and I believe that this made me successful. I was then able to treat the participant like a friend and talked to them like one and therefore I was able to gain a bond with students that many other people were not able to. This was because they looked at the disability first rather than the person (Teacher Candidate #8)

I didn't have diagnostics in my head all I had to go on was presuming competence and that ended up being enough (Teacher Candidate #9).

It is clear that the teacher candidates made deep connections to the true meaning of presuming competence between the course readings and their experiences in the service learning project. The candidates acknowledged the potential for challenges in working with future students, but did not indicate this as an excuse to deny their responsibility as an educator. Instead, they drew upon their belief that all students, regardless of their perceived ability, were capable of and interested in learning and the importance of understanding the person before they considered the disability classification.

### **Inclusion.**

With the teacher candidates discussing the relevance of fear, misconception, and presuming competence as future educators, it is logical that they would consider the impact of their participation in the service learning project on their understandings of inclusive education. Although the course is "Introduction to Special Education," it is taught from a DSE perspective with an emphasis on inclusion and rethinking traditional conceptions of disability and special education.

This class exposed me to the idea of creating an inclusive class. My prior awareness of special education had always been exclusive and segregated. I feel that the most important aspect of inclusion is creating a class with community and support. I believe that having an open-minded approach to community creates a class with a sense of strong unity and inclusion. Both special education and general education students will

work together in the class and learn as a whole. I saw this in our TIES activity. I believe that students of all backgrounds can build relationships with each other in the classroom. These relationships are impossible to grow if we segregate our special education and general education students. Schools need to realize how beneficial communities and inclusive classrooms can be (Teacher Candidate #10).

The most important topic I learned about in this class this semester was inclusive teaching. I heard of inclusive teaching before but I never really thought about how it could be used and so beneficial for everyone. During the TIES program it really hit me that some people disagree with these kids being put into a general education classroom. With the skills that I have learned in this class I feel like as a future educator I could collaborate with other teachers and form an inclusion classroom that meets the needs of all the students (Teacher Candidate #11).

I have never thought about the different types of students who would be present in classrooms. When I was growing up the 'normal' children were in classes together and the 'not so normal' were isolated in their own classrooms. I never really saw them around school, just that they had a special room for these students. My school made it so these students were separated and they were not able to be in the same classrooms as their peers. While taking this class and working with TIES I have seen how great it really is for all students to be together (Teacher Candidate #12).

As with presuming competence, simply understanding the concept of inclusion from course readings is not sufficient to prepare teacher candidates to be dedicated inclusive educators. However, in questioning normalcy, segregation, and the roles that schools play in this it is clear from the above passages that the candidates made real connections to the course readings about inclusive philosophy and pedagogy and their potential as future inclusive educators. In their writing, the candidates challenged traditional special education structures that marginalize and isolate those students perceived to be abnormal, while embracing inclusive ideals such as collaboration, support, community, and benefit for all students.

### **Discussion**

The four themes (fear, misconception, presuming competence, and inclusion) all point to growth, honesty, and hope among these future educators. This analysis indicates that these future teachers acknowledge that they had misconceptions in relation to their understandings of disability, ability, and normalcy. These misconceptions fed their fears about working or interacting with people with developmental disabilities. Many students identified this fear in their writing, but that was typically followed by a discussion about how their fear had been minimized and their confidence in this area had grown because of their involvement in the TIES Service Learning Project. This transformation of fear into confidence perhaps was facilitated by the students' personal experience and understanding of presuming competence in all learners. Presuming competence requires one to see difference and potential within all individuals, regardless of perceived ability or disability. It is precisely this paradigm shift that will ultimately propel these future educators to be true agents of change and embrace inclusion, not as a practice, but a way of thinking about equity in education for all students.

Service learning projects like this one have the potential to provide the types of personal interactions and opportunities for reflection that intentionally push the teacher candidates' thinking.

With the two research questions in mind, the course instructor-initiated conversations each week in class to discuss the weekend TIES activity sessions and to help the teacher candidates make connections between the course, their experiences, and their beliefs about themselves as future inclusive educators. Many of the teacher candidates talked and wrote about the personal connections that they made with the TIES participants and how they shared so many common interests and how the designation of disability was not a complete descriptor for the participants. It was amazing to watch these discussions evolve over the semester as the teacher candidates shifted from speaking about their fears and misconceptions to their belief in presuming competence and inclusion. They began the semester talking about their often nervous, and sometimes terrified, initial experiences in getting to know the participants and then they started to talk more and more about how much they've learned from the participants and how amazing they are as complete human beings. They ended the semester explaining how their beliefs about inclusive education had been transformed.

The teacher candidates moved from expressing uncertainty about attending multiple weekend activity sessions to asking why there weren't more and if they could continue after the semester was over. The teacher candidates talked about how they didn't understand how so many of the participants had not been successful in other programs, especially programs expressly for those with disabilities. They expressed outrage at hearing the parents tell stories about the marginalization and exclusion that their children experienced in school settings. They were frustrated by the unreliable transportation that some of our participants had to rely

upon to even attend the TIES activity sessions. The teacher candidates' real-life interactions with the community participants, their parents and guardians, their drivers, and their support staff were made possible through their participation in the service learning project, a clearly essential component of the course.

### **Conclusion**

The intent of this study was to examine changes or development in the teacher candidates' understandings of disability and inclusion and how this may have influenced their self-perceptions as future inclusive educators after participating in the service learning project component of the course. In this analysis, misconception, fear, presuming competence, and inclusion emerged as significant themes in the teacher candidates' reflective writing about their experience with the service learning project. By the end of the semester, the teacher candidates had become more critical of traditional special education practices because they saw first-hand how these problematic practices affected the TIES participants lives in and out of school.

Being critical of special education does not equate to being against supporting or even including students with disabilities. Being critical of special education means that one sees that special education is imperfect and in need of change. In the spirit of critical service learning (Carrington, et al., 2015), preparing future teachers to question traditional structures of education that marginalize and exclude students with disabilities is imperative if we are to continue to improve educational outcomes for all students. This is some of the hardest work of preservice inclusive educators- acknowledging the shortcomings and mistakes of the

structure, while creating new understandings that empower and enable them to create unlimited and socially just educational opportunities for all of their future students.

In this study, participation in a service learning project planted seeds of doubt and transformation in the minds of the teacher candidates. Although many service learning experiences involve more of a time commitment than the TIES project, this study shows that service learning can be an effective means for inspiring change and transformation among future educators, even when done on a smaller scale and inserted into a course by one instructor. Change happens in many ways, and sometimes that way is one course or one assignment at a time.

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