

Chapter 17

Service–Learning With Students With Exceptionalities: A Commitment to Inclusion in General Education Teacher Preparation

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ABSTRACT

Aspiring educators require more than a basic understanding of inclusion. They need to know how to support students with exceptionalities and inclusion. The purpose of this chapter is to describe how general education pre-service teachers' participation in authentic service-learning experiences during teacher preparation can support deeper understanding of the theories and practices to support inclusion. This chapter begins with a brief history of inclusion and research on the efficacy of service-learning in teacher preparation. The chapter continues by focusing on the intersection of inclusion and service-learning, describing the advantages integrating an inclusion-focused service-learning opportunity in a required course on students with exceptionalities. This chapter provides an example of one university's experience and concludes with practical recommendations and discussion of planning, implementing, and assessing course-embedded service-learning and directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is the practice of including students with exceptionalities in general education and providing appropriate, quality instruction (Wehmeyer, 2009). Inclusion is about all students, not just those with exceptionalities. According to McLeskey, Rosenberg & Westling (2013), all learners “includ[e] those who are at risk for difficulty in school, students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and students identified as gifted and talented” (p. 8). Inclusion promotes effective instruction for all learners through universal design for learning (UDL), modifications, accommodations, and/or differentiated instruction.

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Inclusive education practices and policies are currently required in many countries (Foreman & Arthur-Kelly, 2008). In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) mandates inclusion through the principle of least restrictive environment (LRE) (Turnbull, Turnbull, Stowe & Huerta, 2007). Beyond the U.S., the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations General Assembly, 2007) supports inclusion and has been signed by more than 150 countries and the European Union. The Salamanca Framework (United Nations General Assembly, 1994) established that all students be educated in inclusive schools by 2015. “Inclusive schools that graduate accomplished students must be available in all communities and be effective with all students. Otherwise, the very notion of inclusiveness is exclusive: in some communities, in some schools, for some students” (Kozleski, Artiles, & Skrtic, 2014, p.122). Unfortunately, inclusion continues to be under-implemented worldwide (Sailor, 2016).

To prevent such exclusion, teacher education programs must prepare pre-service candidates to implement inclusive practices (Gilham & Tompkins, 2016; Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman & Merbler, 2010; Specht, 2016). One means of doing so lies in designing courses to apply inclusion theory and research through service-learning opportunities (Able, Ghulamani, Mallous & Glazier, 2014). Much evidence exists to support the integration of service-learning into teacher education programs (Able et al., 2014) as a form of experiential learning (Novak, Markey & Allen, 2007). Service-learning actively engages pre-service teachers in learning processes (Jenkins & Sheehey, 2009) and emphasizes connections to post-secondary content (Lake, Al Otaiba & Guidry, 2010). Although evidence suggests service-learning experiences create deeper, transformative learning opportunities during teacher preparation (Jenkins & Sheehey, 2011; Neeper & Dymond, 2012), a paucity of research exists to guide the integration of service-learning opportunities with students with exceptionalities into teacher education.

In this chapter, the author examines the current educational climate of inclusion and argues for the necessity of addressing inclusion in general education teacher preparation. The literature review from service-learning in special education teacher preparation is used to establish benefits and barriers to implementation. After providing an example and discussion of an inclusion-focused, service-learning course that requires general education pre-service teachers to engage meaningfully with students with exceptionalities, the author concludes the chapter with directions for future research.

BACKGROUND

The vast majority of teacher education programs in the U.S. requires minimal preparation in teaching students with exceptionalities (United States Government Accountability Office, 2009). In many states, teacher education programs are required to provide only a single course in special education (Fender & Fielder, 1990). Perhaps not surprisingly, general education teachers report they are not prepared to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities (Gokdere, 2012) and begin teaching with little or no experience differentiating instruction to meet student needs (Dee, 2011). Teachers feel underprepared to provide inclusive supports (Rodríguez, Saldaña & Moreno, 2012) and experience little assistance serving students who struggle academically and/or behaviorally (Kosko & Wilkins, 2009). Moreover, general education teachers have lowered expectations for students with exceptionalities (Cameron & Cook, 2013; Rupp, Gaffney & Dymond, 2015) and display biases based on stereotypes toward students with exceptionalities and/or their families (Sermier Dessemontet, Morin & Crocker, 2014). Particularly

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