

# Service Learning: Extending the Classroom to the Community

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*Service learning is increasingly used as a valid means of enhancing the learning and practice of teacher candidates at institutions of higher education. The purpose of this article is to describe a service-learning program that aims to help teacher candidates learn the social context of disabilities and its impact on such adults in real-world settings. The special-education teacher-certification program at this 4-year university has included a requirement of 30 service-learning hours for 10 years. The description of the service-learning piece is grounded in four components defined in the Serve America Act of 2009: (a) active participation that requires collaboration, (b) integration of academic curriculum, (c) use of pedagogy in real-world settings, and (d) reflection. The impact of service-learning experiences is demonstrated through the dispositions of teacher candidates in this program.*

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Service learning is a learning activity increasingly used in higher-education programs leading to teacher certification (Butin, 2006). One of the purposes of this type of activity is to build communication and relationships with communities surrounding institutions of higher education with the hope of enriching the experiences of teacher candidates and individuals in those communities (Mayhew & Welch, 2001). Initially characterized in the 1993 National and Community Service Trust Act, service learning was more completely defined when reauthorized as the Serve America Act in 2009. At this time, four components were delineated to emphasize (a) active participation of teacher candidates in organized activities that require collaboration with the school and community, (b) integration of academic curriculum to enhance the learning experience of teacher candidates, (c) use of knowledge and skills of pedagogy in real-world situations, and (d) reflection on the experience to enhance learning for teacher candidates (Pritchard & Whitehead, 2004). In addition to enhancing the learning and use of pedagogical knowledge and skills, service-learning activities have the potential of developing a stronger sense of citizenship, social justice, and volunteerism in teacher candidates. These qualities are introduced and developed in their teacher-education program and become an avenue for lifelong learning and commitment (Iverson & James, 2010; Kirk & Riedle, 2005; Pritchard & Whitehead, 2004).

For those teacher candidates in special-education certification programs, service-learning projects with individuals with exceptional needs—whether early-childhood, school-aged children, or adults—have the potential of providing an enriched understanding of the social context of disability (Santos, Ruppard, & Jeans, 2012). These projects also promote communication and collaboration with various caregivers and service providers

with whom teacher candidates will have working relationships once in their own classrooms. The purpose of this article is to use the four components from the Serve America Act (2009) to explain, support, and distinguish the service learning in a special-education teacher-certification program at one institution of higher education.

Since 2002, faculty in a special-education teacher-certification program at a 4-year university in a midwestern state has used service learning as a required component of the program for teacher candidates. At that time, the state board of education changed the licensure of special-education teachers, abolishing categories for certification (e.g., Learning Disabilities, Emotional/Behavioral Disorders). Instead, special-education certification became a noncategorical license that covered Kindergarten through Grade 12 or 21 years of age. With the new licensure requirements, all special-education teachers would be licensed to teach any and all individuals with exceptional needs, regardless of the specific identification category or level of significance of the disability, excluding visual and hearing impairments. In order to assure that teacher candidates had appropriate experience working with this wide range of identification and abilities, faculty included a requirement of 30 hours of service learning in addition to the required coursework and field experiences in the teacher-certification program.

The purpose of the service learning in this program is to support and enhance the knowledge and skills of teacher candidates in working with individual children and adults with exceptional needs across the lifespan. Additionally, the faculty teaching in the program expect that candidates will develop an understanding of the potential adult outcomes for some individuals with exceptional needs and make links to how special-education teachers and special-education programs, Kindergarten through Grade 12, may affect these outcomes. As a minimum of 300 field-experience hours is required of all special-education teacher candidates prior to student teaching, the required service-learning hours may not be completed in a school setting. The purpose and intent is to form a bond with an individual and provide experience and learning within the surrounding community or in the teacher candidate's home community. The bond and experience are for the benefit of the individual with an exceptional learning need as well as the teacher candidate.

### Service-Learning Components

The first component of service learning in the Serve America Act (2009) requires active participation and collaboration between the school and community. The teacher candidates in the program described in this article are expected to set up their project with agencies in and around the community of the university they attend or near their home. By having the freedom of conducting their required hours near the university or their homes, candidates are able to adjust the hours of service to their needs and those of the individuals served by the agencies. In all of their networking with agency personnel and individuals with exceptional

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needs, the teacher candidates are expected to conduct themselves professionally and ethically. During coursework at the university, at least one class period is spent discussing the dispositional expectations of all teacher candidates, special education and general education, who represent the university. Additionally, special-education teacher candidates are introduced to and expected to absorb the code of ethics of the Council for Exceptional Children. Teacher candidates have worked with agencies to set up special events (e.g., picnics, dances) and awareness walks. Candidates have worked with individuals with exceptional needs of varying ages to improve academic skills (e.g., reading, mathematics) or functional skills (e.g., voting, using the library). Candidates have been employed at day camps or in family homes providing one-on-one care.

The second component of service learning is to enhance the learning experience of candidates by integrating their academic curriculum. Teacher candidates in the program must demonstrate their knowledge of the characteristics of individuals with exceptional needs across the lifespan, disability identification, and significance of disability. They must demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a professional and ethical manner. For example, a teacher candidate could work with an individual with an exceptional need by reteaching a skill, modeling appropriate behavior, or redirecting that individual in how to greet a stranger appropriately. Similarly, teacher candidates need to provide age- and ability-appropriate activities to the greatest extent possible to demonstrate understanding of respecting adults with exceptional needs.

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The third component is using knowledge and skills of pedagogy in real-world situations. Teacher candidates engage in various types of activities in the community with individuals with exceptional needs. These activities are designed to occur in

social settings and to include modeling, instruction, and generalization of skills. For this purpose, service-learning activities of teacher candidates may include but are not limited to grocery shopping, holiday or birthday shopping, and cooking or baking. Additionally, teacher candidates may teach specific job skills or how to use public transportation. These activities, while including an instructional component, are conducted in social, less-formal settings in order to be more natural and potentially less stressful.

The final component is to have teacher candidates reflect on their service learning in order to enhance learning. A formal reflection is not a required component of the program described here. However, throughout the coursework, faculty members stress using service-learning experiences to maintain positive dispositions across settings (e.g., classes, community, and vocation) and to all individuals. Teacher candidates use their experiences to enhance their understanding of theories, practice, and policies that impact communities and individuals with exceptional needs from early childhood through adulthood and with mild through significant needs. Further, teacher candidates use their experiences and activities to enhance class discussions and provide background that leads to richer and greater understanding of individuals with exceptional needs; the communities in which

they live, work, and play; and the role of special-education teachers in developing and supporting these relationships.

### Conclusion

Service-learning experiences have the potential for developing a commitment to lifelong learning for teachers. They may also afford teacher candidates opportunities to expand and enhance understanding of the real-world experiences of individuals with exceptional needs in natural settings. With increased public and legislative attention to teacher-preparation programs, it may be important to follow teacher candidates into their teaching positions to learn how these experiences inform their instruction and interactions with students with exceptional needs and their families. It appears beneficial for teacher candidates to engage in activities that extend from the classroom to the community in an effort to enhance learning and understanding and to promote the principles of global citizenship within the teacher candidates.

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