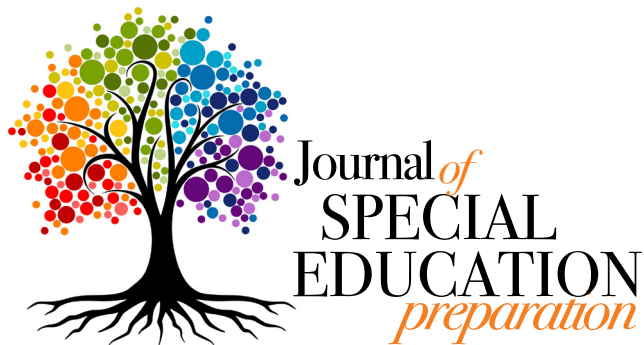




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FROM *the guest*  
EDITOR

## Using Non-Traditional Collaborations to Improve Special Education Teacher Preparation

### AUTHOR

*Shannon Budin*

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As I reflect on my two decades of preparing special education teachers, my time has been spent teaching, supervising, advising, reading professional journals, conducting research, writing, attending conferences, serving on committees and boards, traveling abroad, and engaging with colleagues across the country. Across all these undertakings, one constant and continual source of amazement has persisted: We are one heck of a collaborative bunch, and we do amazing things! Not only do we know how to work together, but we do it in creative ways and for the betterment of our teacher candidates. We teach collaboration to our candidates as a high leverage practice, where the emphasis is on collaborating with other professionals and families through co-teaching, consultation, developing IEPs, and team-based service delivery. In our educator preparation programs we also emphasize (and are evaluated on) our collaborative partnerships with our P-12 partners to ensure high-quality field and clinical experiences. These approaches to collaboration, however, are traditional — expected, even. What amazes me is the wide range of non-traditional or unique collaboration examples that come together to improve educator preparation at many institutions across our country.

### CALL TO COLLABORATE

The purpose of this special issue of JOSEP is to shine a light on these unique (and effective) collaborations and invite authors to share how these approaches are implemented while explaining how they enhance educator preparation. The call to authors to share examples of these unique collaborations yielded overwhelming interest. In the spirit of true collaboration, however, we looked at the response rate as an opportunity to create even more partnerships. Several themes emerged from the proposals, and we worked to form teams of authors from different institutions with varied, albeit complementary topics. The enthusiasm and synergy within the writing groups was exciting— as the editorial team witnessed strangers with common interests become scholarly partners.

### IN THIS ISSUE

As the six articles took shape, we could not help but notice that in all cases the collaboration examples described were born out of a need for improvement or area in which teacher education could be enhanced for the betterment of students with disabilities. Collaborations took place on, and off, college campuses, in the community, on the stage, in museums, and across the globe.

To start, Kaleigh Pickett, Jennifer Malone, and Reesha Adamson address the glaring challenge of teacher shortages by combining efforts across education preparation providers (EPPs), the Department of Labor, and Local Education Agencies. They describe unique Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Programs and how success of these programs relies on creative and purposeful collaboration with outside entities but also within institutions of higher education—across academic and non-academic units on campuses that may not always come together to help students succeed.

In a similar vein, Kristin Murphy, Jennifer Kilgo, and Serra Acar share their

“The purpose of this special issue of JOSEP is to shine a light on these unique (and effective) collaborations and invite authors to share how these approaches are implemented while explaining how they enhance educator preparation.”

experiences of working together across different university programs to prepare candidates across various disciplines. Recognizing the reality that special educators and other service providers must work together to deliver “high-quality, team-based services to students with disabilities and their families”, they describe how everything from the recruitment process to the assessment process can have an interdisciplinary focus when preparing successful candidates.

Moving from campus to community, Jennifer McKenzie, Kathy Ralabate Doody, Marcia Montague, Hollie Mason, and Jennifer Morgan describe community-based service learning as a pedagogical approach for teacher education. By its very nature, community-based service learning requires a collaborative and mutually beneficial approach that focuses on partnership and reciprocity. In their article, McKenzie and colleagues provide creative, inspiring examples of candidates being

involved in their communities where they not only learn about available resources for their future students, but practice engaging with families and other stakeholders, learning to be active participants in the community where students live, play, and grow.

Authors Colleen Wilkinson, Sarah Bubash, Renee Speight, Jennifer Sears, and Suzanne Kucharczyk describe an additional example of a unique community partnership to help teacher candidates obtain hands-on experience outside of a traditional classroom. In their article, they focus on visual and performing arts related collaborations. In one case, candidates support students with disabilities attending an art camp at a local museum where they practice positive behavioral interventions and task analysis, while in another case, art is brought into the university classroom for candidates to explore drawing with a world-renowned cartoonist who collaborates with the special education faculty to help develop candidate imagination, empathy and reflection. In their third example, Wilkinson describes how she incorporated simulated IEP team meetings into her methods course using improv actors as a parent or guardian. The actors could take on the persona of parents who may be disengaged, angry, overwhelmed, or inquisitive—an experience most candidates rarely get, particularly when discussing high stakes or sensitive topics.

Collaborating with others in the college classroom was also explored by Danene Fast, Katie McCabe, Kaylie Clinton, and John Mitchell Ulibarri. This team of authors, comprised of two faculty members and two self-advocates, who are individuals with disabilities, shared their experience using a contact-based intervention approach.

Kaylie and John Mitchell (Mitch) collaborated with the faculty members at two different universities to share their experiences directly with teacher candidates. The contact-based intervention approach is intended to reduce stigmatized perceptions teacher candidates may hold about disability.

In the final article, we shift to a global collaboration example. Authors Andrew Hashey, Lauren Foxworth, Eileen Heddy, Jerry Petroff, Gabriel Walubita, Sitwe Benson Mkandawire, and Mwansa Mukalula-Kalumbi describe two types of collaborative exchanges designed to “transform perspectives of teacher candidates and [build] skilled teacher scholars who are knowledgeable global citizens with a sense of interconnectedness with others” (see their description of “Umunthu” philosophy). The models of international collaboration included in this article illustrate the stakeholder benefits, some challenges, and suggestions for successful implementation—noting that international student teaching experiences are not limited to those outside of special education.

## CONCLUSION

Each of these articles provides a unique look at ways in which collaboration outside of a P-12 context can enhance special education teacher preparation. If “necessity is the mother of invention”, in our field, we should add that it also takes collaboration to move towards a common goal. Like Helen Keller stated, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much”. As you read the unique, and what I consider amazing examples of collaboration, I hope you are inspired to reach out, explore, and partner with others to prepare the best teachers you can!

# Collaboration in Registered Teacher Apprenticeship: Strengthening Systems to Support a Sustainable Special Education Workforce

## AUTHORS

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## ABSTRACT

Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Programs offer a sustainable and innovative pathway for preparing pre-service special education teachers, particularly in rural and low-resourced communities. Exemplary programs integrate competency-based learning, rigorous on-the-job training, and structured mentorship, enabling apprentices to apply theoretical knowledge in real-time K–12 settings. This article explores how two university-sponsored teacher apprenticeship programs in the Midwest use innovative collaborative approaches to strategically combine the efforts of the educator preparation provider, Department of Labor (DOL), and local education agencies (LEAs) to foster a diverse teacher pipeline, address equity, and provide comprehensive mentorship and systematic support to teacher apprentices through the Registered Apprenticeship model. Challenges, benefits, and specific examples of apprenticeship implementation are discussed, highlighting the replicability of these programs as a solution to special education teacher shortages. Authors provide an analysis of programming and collaboration, which underscores the importance of continued investment, cross-sector collaboration, and support to sustain and scale innovative workforce development models for building a pipeline of educational professionals.

## KEYWORDS

**Collaboration, paraeducator, special education, teacher apprenticeship, teacher preparation, teacher shortage, workforce development**

**S**pecial education teacher shortages are a persistent national challenge (Billingsley et al., 2019) and are even more severe and persistent than in general education (Sutcher et al., 2016). These challenges are compounded particularly in high-poverty, high-minority, and rural areas, where many rural schools describe it as “very difficult” or “not possible” to fill teacher vacancies (Brown & Riden, 2023; Hedin et al., 2024; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). These shortages stem from a range of factors—including high attrition, increased student needs, and the financial and logistical barriers to teacher certification (Fallona & Johnson, 2019; Hedin et al., 2024; Tompkins, 2023). Traditional preparation models often fail to meet the needs of nontraditional candidates, contributing to a lack of workforce diversity and preparedness (Heath, 2024).

In response to persistent teacher shortages and a lack of workforce diversity, initiatives such as Grow Your Own in states like Illinois and California have demonstrated success in creating sustainable teacher pipelines (Espinoza et al., 2018). A teacher apprenticeship model for paraeducators in special education can be a structured, earn-and-learn pathway that enables paraeducators to become fully licensed special education teachers while continuing to work in schools. By targeting paraprofessionals, two critical challenges in special education (i.e., the persistent shortage of special education teachers and the lack of diversity in the educator workforce) can be addressed. Many paraprofessionals are racially and linguistically diverse and are already embedded in the communities they serve, making them ideal candidates to

help diversify the teaching profession (Carver-Thomas, 2018). One approach is through Registered Educator Apprenticeship Programs, sometimes referred to as Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Programs (RTAP or RAP).

RAPs have emerged as a promising pathway to address these shortages. These models offer candidates paid, immersive experiences in K–12 classrooms while completing certification-aligned coursework. By integrating academic and practical training, apprenticeship programs reduce financial burdens, create accessible entry points into the profession, and offer real-time support systems that foster retention and educator effectiveness (Fallona & Johnson, 2019). These programs promote a more stable, diverse, and responsive teacher workforce, particularly in high-need areas such as special education (Hedin et al., 2024). In addition, because paraprofessionals who participate in RAPs bring classroom experience and established relationships with students, they are more likely to succeed and remain in the teaching profession compared to those entering through traditional certification routes (Billingsley et al., 2019).

The success of these programs relies on intentional collaboration across systems. Cross-sector planning should begin with the formation of multi-stakeholder advisory boards composed of university faculty, district leaders, and representatives from workforce development agencies. No single institution can develop and sustain an apprenticeship model that meets current industry needs alone. Instead, universities, school districts, and workforce development agencies must coordinate efforts to support candidates academically, professionally, and financially, as has been done by several special education teacher preparation institutions across the country (Brown & Riden, 2023; Fallona & Johnson, 2019; Hedin et al., 2024).

This article explores the critical role of collaboration in teacher apprenticeship programs, focusing on three essential partnerships: (a) within institutions of higher education (IHEs) – including financial aid, academic advising, student support services, and curriculum development and implementation; (b) with K–12 school districts – through structured mentorship, prior learning assessment (PLA) coursework, and communication feedback loops; and (c) with workforce development and labor agencies – leveraging grant funding, case management, and wraparound supportive services.

Through analysis of two midwestern university-sponsored teacher apprenticeship initiatives and the broader literature, this article offers recommendations for designing collaborative systems that support scalable, sustainable teacher preparation pipelines.

## **COLLABORATION WITHIN IHES**

Universities can better support apprenticeship programs by reimagining and integrating services such as financial aid, academic advising, and student support to create a cohesive framework tailored to apprentices. Financial aid offices can develop funding options specific to apprentices, advisors can guide course selection aligned with apprenticeship goals, and support services can address personal and professional development. Additionally, aligning curriculum with competency-based education and emphasizing real-world, mentored learning experiences allows faculty to equip apprentices with the practical skills needed to succeed in their roles.

### **Financial Aid**

One of the first barriers students often encounter when planning to attend an IHE seeking teacher certification is the systemic barrier of working with offices

of financial aid. The knowledge and flexibility of this office play a critical role in ensuring program completion for teacher apprentices. Financial aid offices can be responsive to teacher apprentice needs by providing training and assistance for teacher apprentices in navigating traditional university funding, such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Pell Grants. Additionally, financial aid offices can seek out and embrace opportunities for education funding for teacher apprentices by coordinating with Department of Labor (DOL) funding like the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) which can fully fund classroom training, provide up to 50% of the teacher apprentices salary in reimbursement for the school district providing on-the-job training, and in some cases provide supportive services for teacher apprentices in need such as childcare vouchers and transportation assistance (Employment and Training Administration, 2023)

Another way that financial aid offices can be responsive to teacher apprentices' needs is by building flexible payment structures that support retention and program completion. These flexible payment structures, such as delayed tuition billing for grant recipients or payment plans paced out over 12-months to align with school district salary schedules, can allow teacher apprentices to persist in their training, despite financial challenges. Because these financial aid strategies rely primarily on targeted staff training and administrative alignment, not systemic overhaul, they offer a highly replicable solution for institutions looking to improve their support systems for nontraditional student apprentices.

### **Academic Advising**

A challenge faced by many apprentices when enrolling in IHEs for K–12 teacher preparation is navigating the coursework and certification require-

**FIGURE 1:** Pathways for Paras, Apprenticeship Onboarding Checklist

## Pathways for Paraprofessionals Checklist



To become a Special Education teacher through the Pathways for Paras registered apprenticeship program at Missouri State University, It is highly important that you complete each of these tasks!

As part of the Pathways program, you are considered a Department of Labor registered teacher apprentice. Benefits of the apprenticeship program include:

**Hands-on Experience:** Gain practical, on-the-job training.

**Earning While Learning:** Receive a salary during training, even student teaching.

**Industry-Recognized Credentials:** Obtain credentials recognized by the industry and Department of Labor.

**Career Advancement:** Access higher-paying job opportunities.

**Mentorship and Support:** Benefit from guidance by experienced professionals.

**Financial Assistance:** Potential support for education-related expenses.

### FOLLOW THESE STEPS TO SUCCESSFULLY PARTICIPATE IN PATHS FOR PARAS PROGRAM

#### Complete the Interest Form

This will let us know that you would like to be in this apprenticeship program. [Pathways for Paraprofessional Interest Form](#).

#### Apply to MSU

For undergraduates, select the **Special Education/Cross-Categorical BSED** program. It is free for undergraduates to apply. For graduate students, select **Special Education, Alternative Certification Track, MSED**. There is a \$60 application fee for graduate students. [View this page for more information on applying.](#)

#### Fill out the FAFSA

Go to the [FAFSA website found here](#) and complete the steps to fill out the FAFSA.

#### Apply for Financial Aid

[TEACH Grant](#)  
[MSU Foundation scholarships](#)  
[Outside scholarships](#)

For Questions: [Make an appointment with a Financial Aid advisor.](#)

**Schedule Appointment with your Advisor** For both Graduates and Undergraduates, [view the education advisement page](#), and then schedule an appointment with an advisor.

#### Register through MO Jobs

Create an Individual profile on [MO Jobs](#).

#### FastTrack Workforce Incentive Grant

Undergraduate students enrolled at least part-time in a registered teacher apprenticeship program can apply for the [FastTrack Workforce Incentive Grant here](#)

#### Register for Classes

After meeting with your advisor, you can register for your classes at your earliest registration date and time. For assistance with registering, you can ask your advisor or [review this webpage](#).

#### Complete, Sign, and Submit FERPA Form

Please use [this link to find the FERPA form to complete](#). This gives permission for MSU to communicate with your school district. You will need to sign onto MyMissouriState in order to complete it. It is vitally important that you sign and submit this form.

#### Apprenticeship Agreement Form 671

Please e-sign Apprenticeship Agreement Form 671 to confirm your participation in MSU's Pathways for Paras Registered Teacher Apprenticeship program. This is a digital form that will come to your MSU email from the DOL during your first semester in the program.

**Note:** You should check your university email regularly. All communications, like financial aid and Pathways updates, will come through here and not your personal email. For questions or concerns, please contact [PathsforParas@MissouriState.edu](mailto:PathsforParas@MissouriState.edu). For general information about the program, [check out this website](#).

ments issued by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. One midwestern university with a special education-specific RTAP has developed a useful approach to ensuring success for teacher apprentices that includes several replicable resources and systems, beginning with selecting an advisor, or a small team of these specialized advisors, to be dedicated to the teacher apprenticeship programs. These dedicated advisors should meet regularly with the teacher

apprenticeship coordinators at the IHE to discuss student concerns and coordination.

A defining feature of successful advising in RTAPs is intrusive, or proactive advising, where advisors regularly check in with apprentices, track progress on both academic and apprenticeship milestones, and offer support before challenges become barriers (Varney, 2012). Another way this university is leveraging existing infrastructure to support

teacher apprentices is by changing how they block time for advising meetings. These time slots are 30 minutes for traditional students, and 1 hour for teacher apprentices. This allows teacher apprentices and their advisors additional time to work through complex scheduling needs and discuss any barriers to persistence and program completion, making plans to accommodate the unique needs teacher apprentices face. IHEs seeking to replicate this model can begin by dedicating a small team of advisors, co-training them with teacher apprenticeship leads, and creating a shared online space that maps course enrollment, district-based instruction, and grant compliance requirements.

In addition to this ongoing communication and support for the advisors in learning about teacher apprenticeship, this university has also created a document that walks the apprentice and their advisor step-by-step through the multifaceted process of enrolling in coursework offered by the university, coursework offered through their school district, registering as an apprentice, and completing the various paperwork requirements for financial aid, grants, etc.

This advising model is highly replicable, requiring only a strategic allotment of time for advising appointments, coordination of collaboration and co-training between advisement and apprenticeship staff, and the development of simple and user-friendly resources to guide apprentices through the complex process of registration and funding.

### Reimagining Existing Student Support and Career Center

Universities have long-standing traditions of providing supportive services for students on their campuses (i.e., tutoring centers, student counseling and healthcare services, and career centers). While these resources can be invaluable to the university students on campus, access to these important

services can be limited for students who are considered remote learners, or those who attend classes on campus during non-business hours (Brown et al., 2020). IHEs can leverage innovative practices developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Raaper & Brown, 2020) to expand access to student services such as telehealth, asynchronous tutoring, and remote advising, which can be leveraged to support teacher apprentices.

University career centers can play a critical role in supporting teacher apprentices by shifting from traditional job-seeker services to career advancement tools tailored for working professionals. While apprentices often bring strong soft skills like communication and adaptability, they need targeted support to transition into certified teaching roles. Reimagined career services should offer resources such as advanced interview workshops, personal statement guidance, educator-focused networking, and mentorship opportunities. These supports position apprentices not just for entry into the profession, but for long-term growth and leadership in education.

By adapting existing institutional structures through flexible delivery models, proactive advising, and career-aligned mentorship, institutions can embed these highly replicable support systems into a framework for wrap-around support that meets the needs of nontraditional student apprentices.

### **Curriculum and Implementation**

Further intra-university collaboration must take place with the faculty developing and overseeing the related technical instruction coursework offered by the university, as well as its implementation in schools during on-the-job training for apprentices. This collaborative effort must begin in the RAP planning stages to align the curriculum intentionally and appropriately with apprenticeship competencies and labor standards set by the industry. Competency-based education

(CBE) models are growing in apprenticeship, which was previously primarily time-based. In recent years, RAPs in certain sectors have chosen to adopt CBE approaches to designing related technical instruction curriculum (Jobs for the Future, 2020). CBE emphasizes the mastery of skills and concepts rather than credit hours or seat time (Katz, 2015), which differs from the approach traditionally taken by many university teacher preparation programs.

The development and implementation of competency-based apprenticeship curriculum in teacher preparation relies on teacher candidates having regular access to real-world classroom settings in which to learn and practice the behaviors of effective teaching. However, it is also true that some states report their teacher workforce as 30% first-year teachers (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2025); thus, ensuring a meaningful and positive field placement for apprentice teachers requires strategic collaborative efforts between the LEAs and the IHEs. At times, schools may need to develop creative solutions to ensure apprentices can learn from high-quality practicing teachers while on the job.

While specific curriculum needs will vary across programs and institutions, replicability efforts should focus on ensuring apprentices have access to CBE, allowing them to apply skills in real-world contexts as often as possible. Because field placements using components of CBE are becoming a common attribute of teacher preparation programs, scaling of efforts that are already in place should be an initial focus for institutions building RAPs.

By reimagining institutional processes and leveraging existing infrastructure, IHEs can create a cohesive, scalable framework that aligns academic, financial, and student services in support of teacher apprentices. This comprehensive approach is particularly impactful for

special educator preparation. According to Billingsley et al. (2019), novice special education teachers often face significant stress and burnout due to the demands of the job, especially when they are inadequately prepared through traditional programs. An apprenticeship tailored specifically for special education prepares candidates in a gradual, mentored, and competency-based manner, increasing their readiness and likelihood of long-term success.

This type of collaboration is essential not only for improving certification outcomes among teaching apprentices but also for positioning IHEs as central partners in state-level strategies to develop a diverse and stable special education workforce.

### **COLLABORATION WITH SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

Effective teacher apprenticeship programs in special education rely on strong, sustained collaboration between IHEs and K–12 school districts. District partners play a critical role in bridging coursework with classroom practice, providing mentorship and supervision, facilitating job-embedded learning experiences, and shaping the practical components of certification pathways. This section outlines the structural components of university K–12 school district collaboration that support effective apprenticeship implementation, with particular attention to mentorship, assessment of prior learning, and feedback systems that collectively enhance candidate readiness and workforce alignment.

#### **Structured Mentorship**

In the traditional language of apprenticeship, the “journey worker” is the certified and seasoned expert who will shepherd the apprentice through their learning, provide modeling and feedback on performance of duties over a specified length of time, and serve as a

**TABLE 1:** Examples of University-Level Collaborations and Reimaginings to Support Apprentices

Office/ Service	Challenge	Reimagined Model	Collaborative Solution	Replicability
Financial Aid	Systems not originally designed for adult learners working full-time; limited understanding of DOL funding streams.	Support for apprentices navigating FAFSA as independent adult learners; coordination with workforce grants (e.g., WIOA, Fast Track); flexible payment plans aligned with school district pay schedules.	Train financial aid staff to assist apprentices with FAFSA and integrate DOL grants like WIOA; implement flexible tuition billing aligned with apprentice pay schedules.	Requires cross-training and administrative support but utilizes existing aid infrastructure.
Academic Advisement	Advisors unfamiliar with unique apprenticeship requirements (e.g., grant eligibility, district-delivered courses, employment status).	Dedicated advisors trained in apprenticeship coordination; extended appointment times (e.g., 1 hour); shared guides and tools for navigating district-based coursework and grant compliance	Appoint a small, dedicated team of advisors; provide apprenticeship-specific training; extend advising time; co-develop shared resources (e.g., enrollment guides).	Replicable with modest investment in staff time and collaborative planning.
Career Center	Services designed for first-time job seekers; misaligned with needs of paraeducators seeking upward mobility.	Tailored coaching for advancement from paraeducator roles to certified teaching positions; emphasis on career mobility within K–12 systems.	Refocus services to support in-district career advancement; offer coaching on certification pathways, promotion planning, and strategic career development.	Requires adaptation of career coaching frameworks and staffing adjustments.
Curriculum Implementation	Traditional curriculum and pedagogical models misaligned with apprenticeship structures; limited use of CBE.	CBE aligned with apprenticeship standards; collaboration with school districts to embed practicum and other experiential learning into apprentices' employment roles.	Involve faculty in apprenticeship planning; redesign coursework to align with competencies and on-the-job training; maintain strong faculty-apprentice connections.	Scalable where faculty are open to curricular innovation and field-based integration.

DOL= Department of Labor; WIOA= Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act; FAFSA=Free Application for Federal Student Aid; CBE= Competency-Based Education

general sounding board for the apprentice during their training and education in their new skilled trade. In the language of education, we have historically referred to these individuals as “cooperating” or “mentor” teachers. It is true that to be effective in their roles, novice special educators need systematic mentoring and coaching (Larios et al., 2022). Mentorship of pre-service teachers has been identified as a protective factor in novice special educator retention (Chang & Drescher, 2023). Novice teachers who receive in-district mentoring support in their first years in the classroom report significantly higher feelings of well-being when compared to those who do not

receive mentoring support (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019).

LEAs and IHEs can work together to ensure apprentices are receiving critical on-the-job learning experiences under the high-quality supervision and facilitation of their mentors by determining not only the entry-level qualifications of a potential mentor, but exemplary characteristics that potential mentor teachers should embody in order to provide the most optimal learning experience for the teacher apprentices. These guidelines may vary across different programs or even school sites but will maintain the same priorities for a quality mentor- including attitude

and character, professional competence and experience, communication skills, and interpersonal skills (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2020). Mentors who view themselves as merely providing a classroom placement to practice teaching are more likely to perceive themselves, and their role, as simply a cheerleader instead of educative mentors whose role is to provide targeted support (Larios et al., 2022). Knowing that, mentors selected will need the technical skills of teaching and professional competencies to mentor teaching apprentices. The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, in partnership with American Insti-

**TABLE 2:** Sample District-Led Coursework and Associated Competencies in Special Education

University Course	Competencies	LEA Implementation
Introduction to Special Ed.	<p>Demonstrates knowledge of special education processes including screening through ethical application of placement procedures for children and youth and the general educator’s role in this process.</p> <p>Demonstrates knowledge of the characteristics of students with different disabilities covered under IDEA (i.e., ED, LD, OHI, TBI, autism, language disorders, hearing impairments, and visual impairments) and of students who have specific conditions (e.g., ADHD) that may or may not qualify for services under IDEA.</p>	<p>Real-Life Student Case Studies</p> <p>Shadowing Experiences</p> <p>Co-writing evaluations and IEPs with a mentor teacher</p> <p>Presentations to school staff at PD</p>
Intro to Teaching Cross-Cat	<p>Demonstrates knowledge of classroom organization and management procedures appropriate for use with student groups that include students with disabilities and others with diverse learning needs.</p> <p>Develop an understanding of primary factors that maybe associated with problem behaviors and demonstrate knowledge of strategies, management systems and positive support that may reduce or eliminate problem behaviors.</p> <p>Demonstrates an understanding of the impact of various uses of instructional and adaptive technology on the learning and independent functioning of children and youth with disabilities.</p>	<p>Guided classroom walkthroughs with debriefing and reflection</p> <p>Data collection and analysis practice</p> <p>Running and planning intervention groups</p> <p>Co-teaching with technology integration</p>
Working with Families of Exceptional Individuals	<p>Identify and discuss various strategies to develop collaborative relationships with families, educational professionals, and students with diverse learning needs.</p> <p>Demonstrates an awareness of multicultural issues which impact the education of children and youth with disabilities and other diverse teaming needs.</p>	<p>Participate in team meetings</p> <p>Meet with/observe an interpreter</p> <p>Conduct a classroom materials audit</p> <p>Develop and maintain weekly family newsletter</p> <p>Interview students</p>
Transition	<p>Demonstrates knowledge of the role of transition services as part of special education services and the importance of such services on the career/vocational and post-secondary educational outcomes for students with disabilities and diverse learning needs</p>	<p>Participate in transition meetings</p> <p>Shadow work study program</p> <p>Co-develop a transition fair with local agencies and employers</p>

tutes for Research (2019), published a *Mentoring and Induction Toolkit* that is a useful starting point for teams to collaboratively identify their preferred attributes of a high-quality mentor for apprentice teachers.

Additionally, training can be provided directly to mentors, giving them tools and strategies to provide targeted support to apprentices over their on-the-job experience. This training provided to mentors should be rooted in

professional problem solving, proactive and open communication, and collaboration, and it should clearly outline the responsibilities and roles of the mentor and apprentice in the instructional setting (Larios et al., 2022). Knowing that systematic mentorship is crucial to preparing special educators, close partnerships and collaboration with school districts through the apprenticeship model could improve the quality of mentorship new teachers receive.

In most cases, teaching apprentices are working alongside or under the guidance of a licensed educator for 2 years while they work to complete their preparation program. The paraeducator and special educator dyad in many special education settings is easily adaptable for intentional co-teaching models, which have been proven to lead to gains in teaching ability and the academic achievement of students (Grossman, 2010). However, this arrangement requires careful plan-

**TABLE 3:** Sample Roles and Responsibilities

<b>The University Team will...</b>	<b>The District Instructor will...</b>	<b>The Apprentice will...</b>
<p>Support apprentices through obtaining their college degree at Missouri State University and in obtaining DESE K-12 Special Education certification by offering a <b>dedicated academic advising team, apprenticeship and funding support, and coursework that meets Missouri graduation and certification requirements</b> and has relevance in K-12 classrooms.</p> <p><b>Support districts in delivering quality University-level instruction</b> using provided resources on their campus, that will prepare student apprentices for the common summative assessment at the end of a semester.</p>	<p>Use University provided resources <b>in addition</b> to “on the job” experiences to <b>prepare your apprentices</b> to take and pass the common summative assessment at the end of the semester with proficient demonstration of the course competencies.</p> <p><b>Communicate with the University</b> regarding apprentice progress or performance in a district PLA course as appropriate or as requested.</p> <p><b>Offer PLA courses in accordance with the sequence provided, to only approved apprentices, and in a way that is mindful of the use and protection of resources</b> shared with PLA instructors that are developed and/or curated by MSU Faculty members to prepare the student to pass the common summative assessment with a proficient score.</p>	<p>Meet with their dedicated academic advisor before <b>each semester</b> for guidance and permission to register for classes until their advisor releases them.</p> <p>Approach the work and resources assigned by districts with the same <b>effort and care</b> as campus-provided courses in preparation for their common summative assessment.</p> <p><b>Diligently prepare for, and pass, the common summative assessment</b> at the end of their PLA semester through university LMS, scoring 80% or higher.</p> <p><i>**If mastery is not achieved on the first assessment, participate in reteaching/ reassessing recommendations if the credits are desired.</i></p>

PLA = Prior Learning Assessment

ning to allow the apprentice to both fulfil the duties of their paid role, as well as receive ample time to observe and practice the behaviors of teaching (Fallona & Johnson, 2019).

### **PLA**

Another way that RAPs can collaborate with school districts to support teacher apprenticeship is to develop pathways for awarding credit for prior learning experiences. Many universities have an existing policy surrounding earning credit by assessment or experience, such as has traditionally been the case with coursework in subjects such as modern languages or computing. Given that some students enter their professional studies in the field having already learned foundational skills and concepts from life experiences, on-the-job training, or even military service, they are often able to either satisfy the course requirements through external assessment or complete an assessment developed by the academic department faculty (Fallona & Johnson, 2019; Hedin et al., 2024; Missouri State University,

2023).

PLA or credit for prior learning in teacher apprenticeship could be awarded for a variety of experiences or professional development opportunities that may be available to apprentice teacher candidates in their employing school districts already (Hedin et al., 2024). As Brown and Riden (2023) recently suggested, it is paramount that universities work with community partners to identify specific needs in teacher preparation. Programs looking to develop their own PLA coursework could begin by recognizing and co-creating courses or trainings with K–12 school partners that could be offered as on-site reflections of content typically delivered on campus.

Receiving on-site instruction and closely monitored field experiences can provide apprentices with opportunities to engage with instructional experts in their school district, showcase their growing skills in the teaching trade, and get a head start on learning district-specific programming and curriculum that is typically not available to pre-service teachers receiving all their training at

universities. Developing school district partnerships that allow credit to be earned for prior learning can also reduce tuition costs for educator apprentices. With a possibility of major tuition savings across their training programs, teacher apprentices may be able to enter the workforce with less student debt. One midwestern university-sponsored special education RAP has awarded 3,268 credits to teacher apprentices for high-quality evidence of prior learning, which has saved apprentices approximately \$986,936 in tuition costs over the last 3 years of implementation (Pickett & Adamson, 2025).

### **Communication and Feedback Loops**

When developing school district partnerships in registered apprenticeships, communication and feedback from school districts are essential for programmatic sustainability and growth. The collaborative process here begins with creating a voluntary and visionary advisory board. This board can be as formal or informal as the program needs

it to be, but should be chaired with a variety of representatives from the LEAs, IHEs, Offices of Workforce Development (OWD), and DOL. This advisory board will set the foundation for what the apprenticeship partnership looks like, delegate responsibilities based on strengths and resources, and serve as a sounding board as implementation issues arise.

Following initial collaboration on curriculum and standards, districts then deliver instruction through authentic classroom placements in special education settings. These experiences are planned and facilitated by qualified school district personnel in alignment with established and rigorous competencies provided or co-developed with the IHE. It supports a clear flow of research to practice, allowing for educators at the K–12 and university levels to collaborate on priority content, methods, and strategies. It allows fine-tuned changes to be made as the training is occurring, allowing apprentices to develop the skills and knowledge that employers value. The expectations of all members of the apprenticeship team should be clearly communicated and readily available.

Engaging in intentional collaboration with LEAs ensures that teacher apprenticeship programs remain instructionally rigorous, responsive to workforce demands, and grounded in the realities of special education practice. By co-constructing training experiences, establishing robust mentorship systems, and maintaining continuous feedback loops, these partnerships not only support apprentice development but also advance local and statewide efforts to stabilize and diversify the special education teacher pipeline.

## **COLLABORATION WITH DOL AND OWD**

State DOL and OWD have been partnering with industries to provide

apprenticeship opportunities that cultivate strong and diverse workforces that have powered communities since the founding of this nation (Office of Apprenticeship, 2021). In 2023, the U.S. Department of Education endorsed teacher apprenticeships as part of its national strategy to raise the bar in educator preparation, highlighting the model's potential to transform how teachers are recruited and trained in high-need areas such as special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). This section outlines the services and initiatives out of these offices that benefit teacher apprentices and teacher apprenticeship programs.

### **Case Management and Supportive Services**

An initial and sustained benefit to collaborative work in registered apprenticeship with the DOL and OWD is the staff case managers. When apprentices begin to seek funding or supportive services through the OWD, they are assigned a case manager who assists them in navigating funding and registration, as well as ensuring that apprentices are linked to any service or support that may meet their needs as they work towards certification. This team specifically helps to bridge the gap between a teacher apprentice's knowledge of registered apprenticeship through the DOL and knowledge of the teaching profession by meeting monthly with university apprenticeship coordinators and faculty overseeing teacher apprenticeship programs.

In addition, apprenticeship programs and participants can access supportive services through the OWD. Supportive services are described as necessary to prepare a participant with the resources needed to participate in career and training services. Knowing that many individuals who are attracted to apprenticeship model programs are considered nontraditional students, and are often

career changers or caregivers, supportive services can ensure that teacher apprentices are able to bring those associated value-added experiences to their school district, including cultural competencies, language skill, instructional experience, and commitments to their community, without experiencing restrictive barriers to entry or completion (Muniz, 2020). Examples of supportive services that may be available to eligible apprenticeship participants include funds to support transportation to and from work or training, including car repairs and gas cards, childcare, dependent care, housing, legal-aid services, assistance for acquiring attire, tools, etc., that are necessary for the occupation that the apprentice is training in (OWD, 2024). These services aim to remove specific barriers to teacher certification, including providing access to childcare, which has been identified as one of the leading barriers to recruiting and retaining diverse paraeducators and preventing them from getting their teaching license (Gardner et al., 2019).

### **Workforce Funding**

The shortage of qualified special education teachers is a national concern, with research highlighting financial constraints as a primary obstacle for individuals pursuing certification (Billingsley et al., 2019). Many prospective educators, particularly paraprofessionals and career changers (Muniz, 2020), hesitate to enroll in higher education programs due to the upfront costs associated with tuition and fees. According to Garcia and Weiss (2020), financial incentives, including tuition assistance, play a vital role in increasing the pipeline of special education teachers.

One of the most substantial benefits of registered apprenticeship to apprentices is the potential to access workforce funding to offset the cost of required coursework towards teacher certification.

**TABLE 3:** Recommendations for Building and Scaling Educator Apprenticeships

Program Area	Recommendation
Cross-Sector Planning	Establish multi-stakeholder advisory boards including university faculty, district leaders, and workforce development representatives to guide design and implementation.
University Infrastructure	Designate and train staff in financial aid, academic advising, and student services to specialize in apprenticeship models and compliance.
Curriculum and Instruction	Redesign coursework using Competency-Based Education aligned with industry standards; embed practicum within apprentices' current roles.
Mentorship Models	Co-develop structured mentorship frameworks with clear criteria, role definitions, and training for mentors and university supervisors.
Credit for Prior Learning	Implement formal PLA systems that recognize district-provided instruction and prior professional experience as eligible for university credit.
Workforce Collaboration	Leverage funding streams like WIOA and Fast Track; integrate case management and wraparound services into apprenticeship programs.
Communication Systems	Create continuous feedback loops between IHEs and districts to adjust curriculum and supports in real-time.
Scalability and Replication	Document tools, systems, and outcomes to support adoption by other institutions; prioritize adaptable, context-responsive program design.

Although this is similar to financial aid, financial aid is typically student-driven and based on distinctive characteristics of the participant. Workforce funding, however, is typically broader in scope, not requiring a specific financial need, but acquired and developed to fulfill a workforce and economic need for the community. For eligible programs and participants, two of the largest funding streams available are through WIOA and the FastTrack Workforce Incentive Grant. FastTrack supports apprentices by offering grants that cover tuition, general course fees, and essential apprenticeship-related expenses, including textbooks. The FastTrack Workforce Incentive Grant works to create highly trained individuals to fulfill high-need areas within the economic landscape.

This grant provides specific provisions for apprenticeships, which go beyond the scope of Financial Aid by ensuring that apprenticeships and certifications are covered, not just college degrees.

Through intentional alignment of workforce funding, supportive services, and case management infrastructure, the teacher apprenticeship model can advance state and national priorities to address the special education teacher shortage, demonstrating how cross-sector collaboration can produce sustainable, equity-focused solutions in educator workforce development.

### **BUILDING COLLABORATIVE TEACHER APPRENTICESHIP MODELS**

Initial implementation efforts have

demonstrated that collaborative frameworks that include IHEs, K–12 districts, and workforce development agencies can effectively reshape traditional teacher preparation pathways. At the higher education level, outcomes include the creation of dedicated advising teams, flexible payment structures tailored to apprentices' financial realities, expanded student services for remote learners, and shared tools to support registration, course selection, and compliance. These efforts reflect a systems-level approach to addressing barriers faced by nontraditional candidates. IHEs should designate and train personnel in departments such as financial aid, academic advising, and student services to understand the distinct requirements of educator apprenticeships, including compliance

with DOL standards and state licensure regulations (Garcia & Warner, 2021; Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship, 2019).

At the K–12 district level, these collaborations have led to increased numbers of structured mentorship programs, advisory boards, and the development of district-delivered PLA coursework—allowing apprentices to complete tuition-free, competency-based training aligned with certification goals. Ensuring a robust mentorship model is a key component of successful apprenticeship programs, whereby universities and districts should co-develop structured mentorship frameworks with clear criteria, defined roles, and expectations. Embedding practicum experiences within apprentices' current school-based roles further enhances relevance and contextual learning (Learning Policy Institute [LPI], 2022).

The competencies required of the teacher apprentices can be co-constructed between the IHE and district; while honoring existing knowledge, institutions should implement formal PLA systems. These systems recognize relevant district-provided professional development and work experience for academic credit, accelerating degree completion and reducing costs (Arabandi et al., 2021; Garcia & Warner, 2021). Curriculum and instruction should be redesigned using CBE, allowing apprentices to progress based on demonstrated mastery of clearly defined competencies aligned with licensure and district needs.

Developing communication systems between IHEs and school districts is also important. Continuous feedback loops enable real-time adjustments to curriculum, mentorship, and student support based on program data and stakeholder input (Arabandi et al., 2021).

Finally, partnerships with DOL and OWD have expanded access to funding, wraparound supports, and case man-

agement, while also offering apprentices a nationally recognized credential alongside their teaching certification. Workforce collaboration should include the strategic use of funding sources such as the WIOA and state FastTrack initiatives. Furthermore, integrating case management and wraparound services ensures apprentices receive the holistic supports necessary to persist and thrive in their programs (Employment and Training Administration, 2023; LPI, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

The growing implementation of registered teacher apprenticeship programs offers a transformative approach that addresses the persistent special education teacher shortages, particularly in underserved communities. As demonstrated in the models examined, intentional and strategic collaboration within universities, with K–12 school districts, and with the DOL and OWD agencies is essential for building sustainable pathways to teacher certification. By leveraging shared resources and knowledge, aligning experiences, and removing systemic barriers through policy and support services, these partnerships can reinvent how educators are prepared. As registered educator apprenticeships continue to evolve, further research will be critical to refining the models, ensuring equity for participants, and scaling efforts to meet the needs of diverse learners and communities.

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# Interdisciplinary Insights: Innovative Strategies for Preparing Future Professionals

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## ABSTRACT

Interdisciplinary personnel preparation programs are crucial in shaping the next generation of service providers in early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE), special education, school psychology and counseling, and other related service fields. This article examines three distinct interdisciplinary personnel preparation programs that have developed innovative approaches to improve scholar success, foster teamwork, and enhance community engagement. These programs promote collaboration by breaking down disciplinary silos and enabling faculty and scholars from diverse fields to learn from one another. By integrating cross-disciplinary collaboration and experiential learning opportunities, these programs equip future service providers with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to support the needs of students with disabilities and their families. This article highlights key program components, shares creative methods, and presents effective strategies for preparing personnel across multiple disciplines. It also explores how interdisciplinary approaches can strengthen personnel pipelines, improve workforce diversity and retention, and develop highly skilled, collaborative service providers who can serve alongside families and professionals as cohesive teams.

## KEYWORDS

**Collaboration; early childhood special education; early intervention; interdisciplinary personnel preparation; occupational therapy; physical therapy; school counseling; school psychology; special education**

**T**he chronic shortage of qualified personnel to serve children with disabilities has been a primary focus of the special education field for several decades (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). According to the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Issue Brief (2021), 48 states reported a shortage of special education teachers, and 42 states reported a shortage of early intervention (EI) providers, special educators, and related service providers. Simultaneously, data suggest a wide gap exists between the overrepresentation of children of color in special education and the underrepresentation of special education teachers of color (Bettini et al., 2025). Addressing this persistent shortage and supporting complex needs of children require a systematic commitment to interdisciplinary workforce development that equips professionals across EI/ECSE, special education, and related service fields.

Collaboration and teaming processes are central to special education and supporting positive outcomes for students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) emphasizes collaborative, team-based service delivery, where professionals work together alongside families to develop and implement integrated, comprehensive intervention plans (Yell & Bateman, 2024). Achieving desired outcomes depends on the effective collaboration of all team members. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education and leading professional organizations who focus on students with disabilities (e.g., CEC) further emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary

**TABLE 1:** Features of Three Interdisciplinary Personnel Preparation Programs

Feature	Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Early Childhood Education Project	Project Teachers Learning with Counselors	Project TransTeam Evolution
Disciplines	EI/ECSE and school psychology	Special education PreK-8 and 5-12 and school adjustment counseling K-12	EI/ECSE, physical therapy, and occupational therapy
Program Focus	Birth through age 8	Grades PreK-12	Birth through age 8
Course Scheduling and Modality	Afternoons/evenings with in-person courses	Afternoons/evenings, mix of asynchronous and synchronous online courses with some in-person courses	Afternoons/evenings, in-person courses with some synchronous online class meetings
Innovative program strategy	Recruitment	Nested layers of interdisciplinary support for student wellness and success	Three-phase model of case-based instruction

teaming and collaboration in personnel preparation. And yet, the preparation of personnel is typically siloed and seldom includes opportunities to practice collaborating with interdisciplinary colleagues (Foxx & Anderson, 2020). Preparing future professionals from multiple disciplines to navigate complex challenges in providing services to students with disabilities requires innovative approaches and a coordinated approach to intervention.

Interdisciplinary approaches can strengthen personnel pipelines, improve workforce diversity and retention, and develop highly skilled, collaborative service providers who can serve alongside families and professionals as cohesive teams (Dillon et al., 2021). The purpose of this article is to showcase three interdisciplinary personnel preparation programs that break down silos and bring together scholars across programs to prepare them to be skilled in their future collaborative roles. For each program, we share a programmatic overview and highlight interdisciplinary strategies. Finally, we reflect on implications for practice, including lessons learned, and our recommendations for future research and practice

pertaining to interdisciplinary personnel preparation.

### **Interdisciplinary Programs and Strategies**

The path to cultivating a more interdisciplinary workforce that supports students with disabilities and their families requires reimagining our recruitment, support, and instructional strategies to focus more on collaboration and teaming. In the following sections, we describe three distinct interdisciplinary personnel preparation programs funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) including the Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Early Childhood Education Project (ICEP) and Project Teachers Learning with Counselors (TLC), both at the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMB), and Project TransTeam Evolution at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). These programs bring together university students and faculty from different disciplines to cultivate interdisciplinary collaboration while the students earn certifications and degrees in their area of study. Each project includes financial support from

OSEP for tuition and other expenses in exchange for scholars committing to fulfill service obligations following graduation by serving in professional roles in programs and schools for students with disabilities. Financial support packages are a recommended strategy to recruit and retain candidates of color (Scott & Proffitt, 2021). For each program presented, we share select features and highlight effective interdisciplinary strategies. See Table 1 for an overview of each program.

In planning and implementing our projects, we share a common lens that drives our interdisciplinary values and goals. The theoretical framework guiding our interdisciplinary approaches is situated learning theory (Putnam & Borko, 2000). In situated learning theory, learning is a social process and occurs among and between individuals and materials, within authentic contexts. Collaboration is an essential component of situated learning. Developing scholars' competence and confidence in collaboration requires consistent, long-term opportunities for learning and practice through guided, structured, and supervised experiences (Driver et al., 2018).

### **The Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Early Childhood Education Project (ICEP)**

Beginning in 2019, the ICEP aims to ensure the interdisciplinary preparation and support of master's level students from the two disciplines of the Early Childhood Education and Care and the School Psychology Programs in UMB, an urban Minority Serving Institution (MSI). Faculty from these programs collaborate to prepare personnel to serve infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children with disabilities, along with their families, through shared coursework, interdisciplinary group assignments, coordinated field experiences, and structured joint activities. Both programs are built on nationally recognized professional standards (e.g., Division for Early Childhood [DEC] and the National Association of School Psychologists [NASP]) focusing on the preparation of professionals who work with children ages birth through 8 who have or are at-risk for developmental delays and disabilities and their families across diverse settings.

While interdisciplinary preparation remains the core of the ICEP program, we quickly learned that an interdisciplinary approach to recruit scholars was essential to realizing this vision. As such, recruitment became a critical first step in building an interdisciplinary pipeline of scholars. Faculty collaboration not only spanned disciplines but extended across university units, such as the Office of Student Success, to holistically support prospective scholars through the application and enrollment process.

#### ***Interdisciplinary Strategy: Recruitment***

To effectively recruit scholars into an interdisciplinary preparation program at an MSI, recruitment strategies must be intentional, equity-centered, and community-driven (Flores & Park,

2013). Recognizing that meaningful interdisciplinary preparation begins well before scholars enter the program, we designed our recruitment efforts to build awareness about the program's collaborative nature and to support scholars from application through enrollment. We use multiple internal and external strategies to recruit scholars. For internal outreach, we circulate recruitment flyers with our programs' alumni and practicum/internship listservs, student clubs, colleagues within our college, and our college's Office of Student Success. To engage in external recruitment, we partner with state-level agencies, such as Head Start, state department of public health, EI-Part C community-based programs, partnering school districts, other MSIs within and outside of our state, and professional organizations' state-level subdivisions (e.g., National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC] and NASP). We also use our college's official social media channels (e.g., LinkedIn, Instagram) to circulate our webinar announcements and recruitment materials.

Collaboration with our college's Office of Student Success has been instrumental in our recruitment efforts. By working collaboratively with their team, we identify barriers to access, streamline communication with prospective scholars, and offer individualized support from recruitment to matriculation and enrollment. These collaborations complement the interdisciplinary project faculty partnership at the core of the program, ensuring that scholars are supported holistically.

We host several webinars on (a) interdisciplinary training to provide more information about the program; and (b) how to prepare and submit an application. By integrating interdisciplinary content into webinars, we foster a pool of prospective scholars who are not only

more likely to enroll, but are also better prepared for collaborative, interdisciplinary work in the field. The webinars bring together faculty from both programs to introduce the coursework, field expectations, and answer related questions. Interdisciplinary work is embedded within the program from the very beginning, starting with recruitment. These webinars are often scholars' first introduction to the program and are intentionally designed to reflect the collaborative, interdisciplinary approach they will experience throughout their training. The innovation lies in how these webinars serve as an early and welcoming entry point, often the very first experience scholars have with the program. Designed to be engaging and inclusive, they help prospective scholars feel like, "I belong here," while introducing them to the interdisciplinary coursework and building a sense of community from the very beginning.

For application workshops, we develop sample application materials, such as statement of purpose letters and CVs/resumes. We develop step-by-step instructions with screenshots showing the entire application process, provide direct and clear guidelines on how to write an application letter, such as "*Use this paragraph to talk about your experience working with children*" and share real-life examples. We follow up with prospective scholars who have started but not yet completed their applications, and offer individualized support through virtual office hours to guide applicants through the process and address any challenges. Our goal is to empower prospective scholars by refining their skills in writing compelling application letters and effectively navigating application portals.

All webinars are intentionally structured to require email registration, allowing us to follow up with both attendees and non-attendees. We share a copy of

webinar presentations with all registered attendees. We purposefully schedule webinars outside of school hours or on weekends to reach a broader audience, as many prospective university students from racially diverse backgrounds and historically underrepresented groups may be more likely to work during the day (Deeb-Sossa et al., 2021). By utilizing targeted recruitment strategies and personalized support throughout the process, we aim to foster an inclusive pipeline of scholars well-prepared for interdisciplinary teaming.

### **Project Teachers Learning with Counselors (TLC)**

Project TLC was launched in Fall 2021 to engage in the interdisciplinary preparation of master's level students across two disciplines: Special Education and School Adjustment Counseling at UMB with personnel preparation grant funding from OSEP to begin or continue their careers in the Boston Public Schools and surrounding urban districts. In Massachusetts, the term *school adjustment counselor* refers to school mental health counselors. Our two-year program of study includes shared coursework, group assignments, coordinated field experiences, structured joint activities, and mentorship. Project TLC intentionally focuses on recruiting, preparing, and supporting nontraditional scholars, including individuals from racially diverse and historically underrepresented groups, paraprofessionals, and individuals with a bachelor's degree in an area other than education or related services.

Scholars take coursework at 4:00 pm on weekdays while engaging in field-based experiences at schools during the daytime. Most coursework is conducted online, with a mix of synchronous and asynchronous sessions, and some face-to-face courses are offered on campus.

During their first four semesters, the program of study includes one shared course per semester, alternating between a counseling or special education course. A TLC faculty member or advisory board member teaches each of the four shared courses. Across the duration of the program, scholars also participate in ongoing individual and group advising and mentoring and attend cohort workshops with topics dictated by scholars' requests and needs.

### ***Interdisciplinary Strategy: Nested Layers of Interdisciplinary Support for Scholar Wellness and Success***

Given the timing of TLC's onset in 2021 amidst dual viral and racial pandemics, focusing on how we as faculty cultivate wellness for our scholars was paramount. While our scholars represent racially diverse backgrounds and come from historically underrepresented communities, our faculty team is predominantly white, which prompts ongoing reflection and responsibility in how we foster inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive preparation experiences.

We began our project with a heightened focus on bridging special education and school adjustment counseling content. In practice, we concurrently re-envisioned ourselves as members of interdisciplinary teams with specialized roles to support the multifaceted needs of our scholars. Our mentorship structure evolved into nested interdisciplinary layers that spans scholar peer-to-peer support, TLC faculty in special education and school adjustment counseling, university resources (e.g., counseling center, disability resource office, student success office, writing center), alumni of Project TLC, field-based mentors including teachers, counselors, and school leaders, and our advisory board consisting of practitioners and researchers local to Boston and nationally.

Bringing together these support layers

allows us to function as our own interdisciplinary team with different roles, responsibilities, and expertise we bring to the table to support each other and our scholars. For example, our advisory board and field-based practitioner partners provide ongoing feedback on our syllabi. As faculty, we coordinate closely with support offices such as our university counseling center, disability resource office, and student success office to consult and assist with individual university students, to implement workshops based on emerging needs and interests, and to act as a critical friend when implementing and revising student programming. We define critical friends as colleagues who engage in a mutual and collaborative relationship, offering both constructive feedback and support as needed to achieve a shared goal (MacPhail et al., 2021). Faculty and staff in higher education are often siloed from each other, but research indicates that when they collaborate, the perception is that it results in increased student success (Syno et al., 2019).

This interdisciplinary team also allows us to cultivate what Scott and Proffitt (2021) refer to as a *racially respectful mentoring/support system*, which we could not achieve alone as a predominantly white faculty team. Racial and ethnic representation among mentors is vitally important for preservice student success in their programs (Scott, 2019). For example, one of our field-based practitioner mentors is a black male veteran special educator in the same school district as many of our scholars, and he graduated from a teacher preparation program at our university while working full-time. This partner mentor can offer a different dimension of support and understanding than our faculty team can alone. Collectively, we represent a variety of identities, backgrounds, expertise, and interests that complement each other with the ultimate goal of

**FIGURE 1:** Quick Tips for Establishing Interdisciplinary Support for Scholar Wellness and Success

**1. Set a strong and transparent foundation with the interdisciplinary support team.** Engage in conversation about personal and team expectations and goals which could vary for faculty, staff, and field-based mentors. Come to a mutual agreement on roles and responsibilities, and compensation for efforts as allowable, feasible, and appropriate (e.g., financial compensation, protection of time, reciprocal efforts).

**2. Collaborate as a team to build a living calendar of “touchpoints” for various configurations of the team to engage with scholars in formal and informal ways within coursework and beyond.**

a. Co-facilitate recruitment events and incoming student orientation with representative members of the full team. This introduces the broad array of different support sources for university students from the beginning and reinforces the interdisciplinary support team-based nature of the program. Have each member of the team introduce themselves, explicitly share some of the ways they can support university students, and the ways to contact them.

b. During recruitment and orientation events, consider the inclusion of rotating small groups (or if virtual, rotating break-out rooms) so university students can get to know various members of the team more closely and begin to establish initial relationships.

c. Identify dates throughout the course of an academic program that interdisciplinary faculty, staff, and mentor teammates can co-teach and/or lead class sessions.

d. Offer a variety of opportunities for scholars to participate in small-group and whole group advising sessions led or co-led by different configurations of the support team.

**3. Engage in regular conversations with the interdisciplinary team about scholar progress and also the needs, goals, and progress of the team as these may shift and evolve over time.**

supporting scholar wellness as a foundation for scholar success. As one Project TLC graduate reflected, *“Project TLC’s unique support and flexibility have been a game changer for scholars like me. I have had to overcome some major life obstacles...The supportive team of professors, advisors at the university, and mentors in the schools...has been essential in my completing this program. I don’t get the option to give up...I get the unconditional support and mentorship of this phenomenal team.”* Refer to Figure 1 for recommended strategies for implementing an interdisciplinary support team.

### **Project TransTeam Evolution**

Project TransTeam Evolution, an interdisciplinary program launched over 25 years ago at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), prepares graduate students from ECSE, occupational therapy (OT), and physical therapy (PT) for effective collaboration within EI and ECSE contexts. The program began as a pilot supported institutionally by schools

from both the academic and medical campuses at UAB. Following its initial success, Project TransTeam secured federal funding from OSEP beginning in 2002, which enabled the program to expand and evolve as research and evaluation outcomes have informed knowledge and practice. The program has evolved over time and is grounded in essential cross-disciplinary content, competencies, and processes designed to foster teaming and collaboration skills. Professional organizations and federally funded projects have developed resources to guide the project’s development and implementation as described in Figure 2.

Project TransTeam scholars participate in one interdisciplinary course per semester during their second year of study with field experiences integrated throughout the program. Courses in the late afternoon/evening allow scholars to enroll in coursework from their respective disciplines, field experiences, and/or employment during the day. To promote interdisciplinary collaboration,

an interactive format facilitates active engagement among scholars and faculty to learn from each other. Community collaborators (e.g., families, teachers, therapists, administrators, and teams from local programs and agencies) are included in the courses for scholars to be fully immersed in their perspectives on the day-to-day realities of interdisciplinary teamwork. Many of these participants are Project TransTeam alumni; they provide panel discussions, consultation, mentoring, and resource linkages.

### ***Interdisciplinary Strategy: Case-based Instruction***

A dynamic learning tool used in Project TransTeam is case-based instruction (Snyder & McWilliam, 2003). This instructional approach spans two consecutive semesters based on a three-phase model of case-based instruction developed by the Project TransTeam faculty in response to scholar learning needs observed during early implementation. Case-based instruction requires scholars to actively participate in scenarios that

**FIGURE 2:** Resources for Interdisciplinary Personnel Preparation in Early Childhood Special Education

Resource	Purpose
Early Childhood Intervention Personnel Center (ECIPC) <a href="https://ecipc.org/">https://ecipc.org/</a>	Includes tools such as curriculum planning templates, checklists for integrating cross disciplinary competencies, and model syllabi to align programs with standards and evidence-based practices.
Cross Disciplinary Competency Areas and Indicators <a href="https://ecpcta.org/cross-disciplinary-competencies/">https://ecpcta.org/cross-disciplinary-competencies/</a>	This resource outlines shared knowledge and skills essential across disciplines serving young children with disabilities. They guide faculty in preparing graduates from multiple disciplines to deliver high-quality team-based services.
Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (EI/ECSE) Professional Standards (2020) <a href="https://www.dec-spced.org/ei-ecse-standards">https://www.dec-spced.org/ei-ecse-standards</a>	Developed by the DEC and CEC, these standards define the specialized knowledge and skills needed by professionals in EI/ECSE. They guide personnel preparation program development and emphasize teaming and collaboration as essential components of effective practice.
Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Recommended Practices (2014) <a href="http://www.dec-spced.org/recommendedpractices">http://www.dec-spced.org/recommendedpractices</a>	The DEC Recommended Practices are a set of evidence-based guidelines designed to improve outcomes for young children with disabilities. They emphasize teaming and collaboration as critical for effective EI/ECSE services to be addressed in personnel preparation programs.
DEC Recommended Practices Monograph 6: Teaming and Collaboration (2019) <a href="https://www.dec-spced.org/product-page/dec-recommended-practices-monograph-series-no-6-teaming-and-collaboration">https://www.dec-spced.org/product-page/dec-recommended-practices-monograph-series-no-6-teaming-and-collaboration</a>	This monograph supports faculty by offering practical, evidence-based strategies for building and sustaining effective collaborative partnerships among families and professionals across disciplines and early childhood settings.

reflect the types of experiences they will encounter and prepares them for their future roles. Initially, scholars were introduced directly to complex cases; however, many encountered challenges addressing the numerous variables inherent in such cases. To scaffold learning more effectively, the faculty revised the instructional design to introduce case complexity in a developmental sequence, resulting in the three-phase model (i.e., unidimensional, multidimensional, complex cases; Kilgo et al., 2019).

The first phase, unidimensional case studies, presents a single dimension of diversity related to the type of disability,

family structure, religious diversity, or ethnic background. Addressing single dimensions of diversity during this phase allows scholars to build foundational content and teaming skills before encountering more complicated scenarios. After several weeks of practice with unidimensional cases, scholars engage in the second phase, which involves a series of multidimensional cases with more multifaceted content. These scenarios reflect the realities of early childhood service delivery where families may advocate for practices that differ from those of the educational team or are not fully aligned with recommended practices or policies.

Scholars collaborate in interdisciplinary groups to develop plans that reflect and respect family values, priorities, and goals, while also addressing professional and programmatic considerations. This promotes confidence in scholars' abilities to accommodate more challenging, multidimensional cases over time (Kilgo et al., 2019).

During the second semester, scholars enter the third phase, which involves comprehensive, complex case studies. Scholars are assigned to teams of four to five members representing multiple disciplines and given a detailed complex case involving a young child that qualifies for services under IDEA. The

**FIGURE 3:** Complex Case Example: Diego

<b>Complex Case Example: Diego</b>
<p><b>Background:</b> <i>Diego, born at 26 weeks, is diagnosed with spastic quadriplegia cerebral palsy. His mother passed away after his birth, and he is in the care of his aunt Donna and grandmother Valentina, both from Honduras. Diego has a history of severe medical complications, including hydrocephalus requiring a shunt, and he uses a g-tube for feeding. His aunt speaks limited English. The family relies on interpreters and neighbors for communication support. They have limited financial resources and no personal transportation in the rural area where they live.</i></p>
<p><b>Early Intervention (Part C, Age 24 Months):</b> <i>Diego was delayed in sitting, mobility, speech, and feeding. He uses an umbrella stroller, bunny crawls, and has difficulty with motor skills and communication. The family faces religious and cultural conflicts about medical care (the grandmother prefers traditional healing), language barriers, and limited access to resources. His aunt is concerned about paying for preschool, while the grandmother prefers a local preschool with questionable developmental appropriateness.</i></p>
<p><b>School-Age (Part B, Age 42 Months):</b> <i>Diego now attends a public Pre-K class. He uses a walker for short distances but lacks proper adaptive equipment. His gross and fine motor delays affect his mobility, feeding, toileting, and classroom participation. He understands much but struggles to express himself. He uses picture cards but has trouble with symbolic images.</i></p>
<p><b>Key Issues:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural and language barriers between family and service providers;</li> <li>• Conflicts within family about medical care and limited resources;</li> <li>• Preschool appropriateness and affordability;</li> <li>• Need for mobility and seating support at home and school;</li> <li>• Assistive tools for feeding, communication, and classroom tasks;</li> <li>• Transition planning from early intervention to preschool services</li> </ul>

interdisciplinary faculty collaboratively develop the complex cases that include multiple dimensions of diversity (e.g., disability, family structure, race, ethnicity, language, gender, religion, economic differences) and system-level challenges (e.g., appropriate services, inclusion, resource availability). Figure 3 provides a condensed example of one of the complex cases. The complex cases sometimes include family structures, beliefs, and situations that are unfamiliar to the scholars and often are inherently in conflict with the values of the team members (e.g., family with a religious practice that does not allow the use of traditional medicine; Aldridge et al., 2016).

The complex cases require the expertise of a team representing multiple

disciplines. In completing the semester-long assignment, teams of scholars apply their collective expertise through weekly components that build toward a culminating final product. Each case is structured to simulate authentic team-based planning and decision-making in various service contexts at different transition points. Each team of scholars develops a written report and oral presentation that address key components of the complex case assigned to their team, which includes the following: (a) describe the setting, description of the team, and available human resources; (b) describe the child (characteristics, disability, strengths, needs) and family (social history, family strengths, cultural considerations); (c) identify the roles and responsibilities of the disciplines on the

team including the primary provider; (d) determine assessment instruments and processes (formal, informal, team-based) to be used; (e) develop the outcomes/goals for the Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP) and Individualized Education Programs (IEP) with clear evidence of opportunities for family input; (f) determine intervention strategies to meet outcomes and goals with explanations for choices of strategies, the evidence to support the intervention, and how team members will carry out the intervention; (g) identify formal and informal resources; (h) address the specific issues identified in the case; (i) plan for transitions from early intervention and preschool; and (j) describe how the team functioned and perceptions of overall effectiveness.

When teams of scholars work together on the complex cases, they practice collaboration and apply teaming strategies including communication, problem-solving, joint decision-making, consultation, and group facilitation. Multiple opportunities arise for learning to occur as the scholars develop all components of the complex case studies and focus on the issues and challenges as a team. The assignment concludes with presentations in which teams share their cases, facilitate discussions about the complexities of their case and how they addressed the issues, and respond to faculty and peer questions. These culminating experiences promote the development of teaming skills and processes, professional reflection, and cross-disciplinary feedback that further enrich scholar learning (Kilgo et al., 2019).

The scholars have consistently provided positive feedback on the program's benefits and effectiveness. As one graduate reflected, "*We were prepared to implement a transdisciplinary model by working with team members representing different disciplines. We learned from each other, developed team-based*

goals, determined appropriate interventions, and found the best available evidence as a team. The team assignments allowed us to put trust in each other and effectively communicate, problem solve, and sometimes compromise to work through our complex case studies, which is what working as a transdisciplinary team requires.”

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSONNEL PREPARATION**

Engaging in interdisciplinary education yields bountiful opportunities for innovative and improved methods for recruitment, support, and instructional approaches. In looking to the future, we believe interdisciplinary personnel preparation should continue to expand as a model for preparing individuals to support students with disabilities and their families. In this section, we share lessons learned from our experiences building and implementing personnel preparation programs.

### **Lesson One: Recruitment Begins Early and is a Shared Responsibility**

Our recruitment efforts have underscored a vital lesson: building a diverse cohort of scholars for our interdisciplinary programs requires far more than targeted outreach from an admissions office. It involves sustained, relational engagement by faculty who offer individualized guidance to prospective scholars, alongside coordinated institutional support. Partnership with university offices (e.g., financial aid, Student Success) also ensures that the pathway from matriculation to enrollment to graduation is accessible for scholars from historically underrepresented communities.

Our work within an urban MSI has demonstrated that innovative impact

arises from active listening to our prospective scholars, offering transparent information about the interdisciplinary program, and building infrastructure that reduces systematic barriers. As we envision the future of special education, we are called to redefine recruitment as a proactive, inclusive endeavor, one that begins with how we better introduce our programs to future scholars.

### **Lesson Two: Ongoing Effort is Key for Interdisciplinary Success**

How can higher education institutions collectively foster interdisciplinary connections and prepare future professionals with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to address complex, intersectional needs in education? Interdisciplinary preparation is not a “set it and forget it” effort. Once interdisciplinary scholars are admitted into our programs, faculty collaboration plays a critical role in leveraging insights gained during recruitment to provide meaningful, targeted mentoring throughout their academic journey. We must embed interdisciplinary practices into all aspects of our personnel preparation programs (e.g., recruitment, scholar support, instructional strategies). Achieving this requires a willingness to innovate, extensive planning, clear communication, and institutional support. Challenges such as varying levels of experience and background knowledge among scholars also highlight the need for flexible and individualized approaches, including mentorship and support from faculty, university staff, and community partners.

In addition to preparing our scholars via their interdisciplinary-focused coursework and field experiences, we must simultaneously “walk the walk” of engaging in interdisciplinary practices ourselves as faculty members. A rich variety of resources and staff are available on each of our campuses that

hold unique expertise to support our scholars. These resources are in addition to community-based partners, including veteran teachers and administrators, and graduates of our programs, who can all provide targeted and specific types of support and possess unique bases of knowledge and experience above and beyond what we alone as faculty bring to the table.

In collaborating within this interdisciplinary team of partners, we would be remiss not to acknowledge the importance of investing ongoing time and offerings of reciprocal support to cultivate true partnerships. Furthermore, when collaborating with partners of color and women partners of color, we must recognize the disproportionate service burdens they often experience. Where appropriate and allowable, we must advocate for financial compensation and protection of time (e.g., course releases or relief from other roles/responsibilities) to acknowledge their service (Scott & Proffitt, 2021).

Our scholars consistently report that working closely with the variety of individuals in our program’s support network has helped them better understand the roles of multiple professionals, foster mutual respect, experience academic success, and feel a sense of belonging. This support network also increased opportunities to cultivate racially responsive mentoring/support systems, which are a critical tool to further support a sense of belonging and success among scholars of color (Scott & Proffitt, 2021).

### **Lesson Three: Embrace Adaptation**

When engaging with various teammates and merging distinct programs in interdisciplinary personnel preparation, we encourage higher education faculty to embrace adaptation while remaining committed to their goals. For example,

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during the initial implementation of Project TransTeam's three-phase case-based instruction model, faculty overestimated scholars' readiness to address complex cases, revealing a need for a more gradual introduction to case complexity. The phased approach that begins with unidimensional cases and progresses to multidimensional and complex cases was then developed which allows scholars to build foundational knowledge, confidence, and teaming skills over time in a scaffolded manner.

Similarly, when we first designed Project TLC, our focus was on the academic program of study, and we paid less attention to our existing model of advising, which we believed to be sufficient. Over time and based on listening to our scholars and soliciting feedback from project partners, we expanded advising and mentorship to occur in a variety of formal and informal ways to more fully support scholars in individualized and larger group models with a diversity in representation.

## CONCLUSION

Our projects reinforce that interdisciplinary education is not only possible but essential for preparing a workforce that can deliver high-quality, team-based services to students with disabilities and their families. The benefits of interdisciplinary training are illuminated by the roles our program graduates go on to pursue. For example, one Project ICEP graduate is now a family childcare coach and focuses their research and practice on the birth-to-three age group and advocates for their needs. One of Project TLC's graduates is now a therapeutic support counselor in a therapeutic day school in an urban public district and focuses on supporting students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Project TransTeam graduates are employed in early intervention, preschool, and early primary programs as service

coordinators, teachers, therapists, and administrators serving as collaborative leaders and advocates for young children with disabilities and families.

When we think about our preservice scholars' professional futures, we know one thing for certain. They will graduate from our programs and join interdisciplinary teams that must collaborate across professional roles to support the outcomes of students with disabilities and their families. Therefore, in higher education, it is imperative to create more opportunities for interdisciplinary personnel preparation focused on special education and related services.

While the importance of incorporating collaboration into personnel preparation has been acknowledged for some time (e.g., Brownell et al., 2010), further research is required to identify the most effective methods for equipping teachers with collaborative skills (Kilgo et al., 2019). We recommend that institutions of higher education (a) broaden the interdisciplinary focus within personnel preparation programs; (b) invest in innovative interdisciplinary practices to address recruitment, scholar support, and team-based instructional strategies; (c) enhance approaches to assess program effectiveness and team-based learning; and (d) develop improved evaluation processes that link the effectiveness of interdisciplinary training to graduate performance (Kilgo et al.).

We must continue to innovate to develop and sustain well-prepared professionals to serve in interdisciplinary collaborative roles that achieve the goals of IDEA (Yell & Bateman, 2025). We urge faculty and institutions of higher education to break down disciplinary silos and reimagine personnel preparation. We hope the projects described will serve as resources for those seeking to implement, expand, or improve interdisciplinary personnel preparation programs. Investing in high-quality

interdisciplinary education at the higher education level will elevate the quality of team-based services, benefiting students, families, and professionals from multiple disciplines who serve them. We hope that in time, interdisciplinary personnel preparation will no longer be considered an innovation and will simply be the norm.

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# Implementation of Community-Based Service Learning in Special Education Teacher Preparation Programs

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## ABSTRACT

Community-based service learning (CBSL) is a powerful pedagogical approach for teacher education and other service-oriented training programs that integrates meaningful community engagement with academic learning. Benefits of CBSL include enhancing teacher candidates' ability to connect theory with practice, cultivating reflective practitioners, and strengthening relationships between universities and communities. This article explores how CBSL can be effectively implemented in teacher education programs through three case studies from different institutions. The first case highlights collaboration with community-based partners to offer teacher candidates service-learning experiences that enhance teacher identity development, strengthen awareness of community resources, and allow for collaboration with the community to serve the whole child. The second case illustrates how a teacher education program, along with other service career programs, works with the local special education collaborative to provide space and physical activities for students with high support needs. The third case is a collaborative community-based program hosted by local recreational partners and staffed by graduate special education teacher candidates that provides activities to individuals with autism spectrum disorder, their families, and invited guests in a welcoming and sensory-friendly setting. The article concludes with recommendations for integrating CBSL into teacher education curricula to maximize its benefits.

## KEYWORDS

**Collaboration, community-based education, high-impact practice, service learning, teacher education, teacher preparation**

Experiential learning is a mainstay in teacher education, as the vast majority of Educator Preparation Programs (EPP) require both field experience and student teaching. These experiences allow for teacher candidates to practice their craft while being supervised by a veteran teacher. While field experiences in schools may be beneficial for everyone involved, these experiences alone may not be sufficient for teachers who work with students with disabilities (SWD), who are expected to interact with the local community and students' caregivers regularly. Additionally, students' individual education plans (IEPs) must contain goals and services to develop functional and independent living skills, including using community resources for access to basic needs, education, and/or recreation, whenever students have educational needs in this area (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004).

Knowledge of available resources in the local community, what they provide to students, and how to utilize their services is critical for special educators who may be tasked with coordination between caregivers and these services. Unfortunately, traditional field experiences often focus on instruction within the classroom (O'Brien et al., 2024) and lack experiences to build candidates' proficiency with other responsibilities, such as appropriate inclusion of important transition-related IEP requirements. Further, schools and the community must feel as though they are receiving a beneficial service when partnering with EPPs for learning opportunities.

If community partners perceive that they are providing more services than they are receiving, they may feel resentful or, worse, exploited for free education (Bortolin, 2011; Cronley et al., 2015; Eby, 1998). It is crucial that a balance is found between the benefits to teacher candidates and the local community, which can be achieved through collaborative, deliberately crafted community-based service learning.

## DEFINING COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICE LEARNING

Community-based service learning (CBSL) is a powerful pedagogical approach for teacher education and other service-oriented training programs that integrates community engagement with academic learning (Coffey, 2010). The foundation of service learning was laid by John Dewey (1938), who asserted that “all genuine education comes about through experience” (p. 25). This is a long-held truth for teacher education, which values classroom experience for application of content knowledge. The Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching (2015) describes community engagement as “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (p. 2). Further, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has designated community-based learning as a high-impact practice for higher education based on evidence of effectiveness for college students, institutions of higher education, and community partners (Chittum et al., 2022; Kuh et al., 2008). Field experiences are generally not considered CBSL, as they are designed specifically to aid the teacher candidate to either witness or practice content they have learned in courses and do not often include intentionally planned mutuality. Although

PK-12 schools may gain some incidental benefit of hosting teacher candidates, that is not the goal of field experience. This issue can be addressed through the use of CBSL by EPPs.

Each of the three case studies shared in this article incorporated four basic elements of effective service learning in the model proposed by Chambers and Lavery (2012) to develop and implement their CBSL programs. This model posits that university students must be engaged in meaningful, active service that addresses a community need, and the service and learning goals are of equal importance. In other words, the benefit of the service to the community must be commensurate to the practical learning gained by the teacher candidates. This ensures that the EPP is not simply planning a practicum project to provide learning for their candidates. There is also reciprocity between the EPP and those receiving the service, with the community having control of identifying the service tasks. This allows the community to direct the program to the most acceptable undertakings. Finally, the program is implemented in four interdependent stages: preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration (see Figure 1).

During the preparation stage, a need is identified, investigated, and analyzed, and then a plan of action is formulated. Time must be taken during this step to ensure that all groups engaged in the planning process have a thorough understanding of the factors contributing to the need and how the EPP can best be of service. Explicit responsibilities and goals, as well as benefits to all parties involved, should be established. The action stage is the direct result of the preparation stage and includes active university student engagement in the service tasks. During the reflection stage, teacher candidates examine how the experience relates to their own lives, their future careers as teachers, and their

**FIGURE 1:**  
Stages of Effective CBSL



communities. This can happen through reflective journaling and is enhanced through class discussions with instructors and peers who are also participating. The action and reflection stages should happen together, as candidate learning will grow the most if they can act, reflect, and adjust. Lastly, the demonstration stage provides opportunities for teacher candidates to showcase their learning through public and/or class presentations or written products based on their experiences in the first three stages. Although evidence of effectiveness in EPPs is scarce, several benefits for participants have been demonstrated.

## BENEFITS OF CBSL TEACHER CANDIDATES

In addition to special education teacher candidates learning the basics of how to teach through coursework and practicing teaching through traditional field experiences, incorporating CBSL can promote critical thinking, help teacher candidates understand the social context of disability, and build reflective teaching (Mayhew & Welch, 2001). The opportunity to work in communities provides teacher candidates the space to witness that worthwhile education happens in community spaces, not just in schools, and allows them to connect content knowledge with applications

beyond the classroom (Tinkler et al., 2019). Only when they become active participants in the community can teacher candidates determine how their actions, and those of other entities, affect community members. These experiences can then support improved cultural understanding and practice (Lund & Lee, 2015) and prepare future teachers to work with families (Korzekwa Hampshire et al., 2015). Once teacher candidates have a better understanding of the community in which they may teach, CBSL can help them to develop civic knowledge, skills, and motivation (Mayhew et al., 2016) that they can use to advocate for students and their caregivers. Anderson (1998) notes that, within teacher education, service learning “reflects the belief that education should develop social responsibility and prepare teacher candidates to be involved citizens in democratic life” (p. 1). In addition to enriching the learning and professional growth of teacher candidates, CBSL also generates important benefits for the communities it serves.

### Community Partners

CBSL programs are different from other methods of experiential education, including traditional field experiences and student teaching, because they aim to equally benefit teacher candidates and the community, focusing both on the service being provided and the learning that is occurring (Furco & Billig, 2002). When engaging in CBSL, there can be a tendency to form a “bias toward student outcomes” (Stoecker et al., 2009, p. 4), meaning the learning of the teacher candidate is prioritized above meeting the needs of the community (Lewis, 2004). This must be circumvented by more fully understanding the local culture of the community to consider goals that benefit them (Tinkler et al., 2014). As Tinkler and Tinkler (2020) point out, CBSL has the potential to build social capital with-

in and across communities, leading to “stronger, more resilient, and connected communities” (p. 55). Although benefits to teacher candidates and community participants may be more evident, faculty can also benefit from CBSL.

### Teacher Education Faculty

Though CBSL may not be specifically designed to benefit faculty, they also find professional benefits in research, pedagogy, and real-world application through their participation. Faculty can utilize CBSL to conduct action research to test theories in practical settings with their own students (Darby & Newman, 2014). For faculty pursuing tenure, participating in CBSL provides a valuable opportunity to advance the scholarship of teaching through research, reflection, and scholarly dissemination. Additionally, faculty can practice new pedagogies, leading to improved teaching practices (Able et al., 2014). Faculty are able to facilitate learning in real-world scenarios, enabling them to connect course content to practical settings (Lasen et al., 2015). In the following case examples, many of these benefits for teacher candidates, community partners, and faculty participants are exhibited in various ways.

### CASE STUDIES IN CBSL

#### Case Example 1: Texas A&M University Community Partnership Experience Day

As part of an early field pre-service teacher course on family engagement and empowerment at Texas A&M University (TAMU), teacher candidates are provided the opportunity to participate in a community partnership experience day (CPED; e.g., creating food backpacks at a food bank, organizing a clothing closet at a nonprofit, and tending a garden at a center for independent living). Participants in this program typically include sophomore-level undergraduate students pursuing a career in education. Most stu-

dents are pre-service special education students, while a handful are pre-service bilingual education students, human development and family science majors, or psychology majors. The course focuses on equipping the teacher candidates with the skills necessary to work with diverse types of families, including identifying the importance of collaboration with caregivers, schools, and community service providers, as well as locating school-based and community resources that serve children and their families within their community.

Within the preparation stage of designing this CPED program, the course instructor and graduate assistant (GA) looked to create a program that connects students to local community resources. Research indicates that educators should strive to understand and connect their teaching to the community, thereby facilitating rapport-building with their students (Hollinsworth et al., 2024; Sherfinski, 2023). However, there is also evidence to demonstrate that educators struggle to make connections to the community in which they teach because they are underprepared to incorporate students’ communities into their teaching (Autti & Bæk, 2019; Hollingsworth et al., 2024). The goal of the CPED was to provide teacher candidates with a hands-on learning experience with local community partners who serve families in need within the community, thereby providing students with knowledge of local, regional, state, and national resources and the skills needed to make connections to those resources, regardless of where they end up teaching.

Since its inception, CPED has evolved each semester based on teacher candidate and community partner feedback, as well as instructor and GA reflection. At the end of each CPED, students and community partners are asked to provide written feedback. The goal of gathering feedback is to build on what works well

and identify areas that need refinement. The first CPED occurred in the Fall of 2023. Five community partners were carefully selected as “stops” throughout the day. The duration of time spent at each partner location was approximately 45 minutes. This time allowed for a tour and an informational presentation delivered by one of the partner members. Information typically included the organization’s background, who they serve and how, and the community with which they work to support those in need. Through written feedback and reflection by the instructor and GA, this program has evolved over four semesters. Program changes have included a) reducing the number of stops from five to three, b) increasing the amount of time at each stop, c) varying the community partners, and d) adjusting the beginning and end time of the program.

The instructor and GA have recognized the need to incorporate different community partner focus areas (i.e., supporting low-income families, supporting families with individuals with disabilities) and dedicate a greater amount of time at each stop. Therefore, based on a review of written teacher candidates reflective feedback, attempts are made each semester to visit different community partners while maintaining one or two of the most impactful stops. The most recent CPED iteration included three community partners. Based on written feedback, the duration of each stop was extended from one hour to up to two hours, depending on the stop (i.e., the local food bank required a minimum of two hours to volunteer). The extended time at each stop allowed for informational presentations, tours, and additional volunteer time. In addition to adjustments to the logistical aspects of the program, the instructor and GA refined the program’s curriculum to facilitate deeper connections between the community partners and teacher candidates.

Program adjustments will continue each semester in response to partner and candidate needs and feedback. Additional community partners will be added, and likely, an alternation of current community partners will occur to ensure teacher candidates get to experience, understand, and make connections with the various community partners that serve those in need. Such collaborative community partnerships can help teacher candidates enhance their professional development as future educators and potentially make meaningful connections in the communities they will serve.

Ensuring that partnerships offered reciprocal impact remains essential (Baldwin et al., 2007; Jacoby & Associates, 2003). As part of CPED planning and implementation, instructors facilitated opportunities for faculty and teacher candidates to engage with community organizations in ways that allowed for mutual interaction and potential contributions from the university. Through the reciprocal nature of the program, community partners became educators by sharing their program’s mission, efforts, and needs, while the instructor and GA became learners alongside the teacher candidates, engaging in a level of learning that extended beyond the four walls of a classroom. By equipping the teacher candidates with knowledge of the organization’s mission and services, the potential for them to share information and increase the foot traffic for the organizations increased. Community partners received task-specific support from many students during a given time, such as organizing clothing closets and food pantries, packaging food bags for backpack programs for food-insecure families, and creating inspirational murals; such efforts serve as a benefit for the community partners (Buchanan et al., 2002).

The benefits of this CBSL program have been many. Many teacher candidates found the experience so impactful

that they shared the volunteer information with their university organizations, church groups, and friends for future volunteer opportunities. Additionally, the benefits were demonstrated through their practicum reflection assignment, submitted at the end of the semester. Through this documentation, instructors noticed that candidates’ professional identity as special educators developed further. They had become knowledgeable about community resources and had developed an understanding of how to make referrals and connect caregivers to necessary community resources. They also made academic connections and reflected on their values (Simons & Cleary, 2006). Such growth in relation to identity development is documented in the research, highlighting that when teacher candidates engage in the community, their professional identity as educators emerges (Williams & Lee, 2020).

Faculty and graduate assistants in teaching were provided real-time feedback on the impact of the experiences. Through real-time observations, instructors had the opportunity to witness connections being made between concepts taught in class and real-world applications. As a result of the chosen community partners, the field experiences complemented class lessons, lending themselves to candidates’ higher-order thinking and engagement. Most importantly, instructors were able to bring stories from the field back into the classroom to highlight lessons taught. Continued planning and refinement of CPED are essential, as is maintaining partnership relationships. All parties benefit when the faculty shows responsiveness to community needs and seek to establish and grow reciprocal relationships.

### **Case example 2: Western Illinois University Adaptive Activities for All (AAfA)**

The Adapted Activities for All (AAfA)

**TABLE 1:** Different Program Majors and Why They Were Included in AAfA

<b>Program Major</b>	<b>Reason for Inclusion in AAfA</b>
Physical Education Teacher Education, Exercise Science, Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Administration	Understand adapted recreation activities
Speech Pathology and Audiology	Understand how motor activities can enhance speech and language skills
Special and Elementary Education	Link classroom expertise to physical activities
Music Therapy	Incorporate music and rhythm in non-clinical settings
School Psychology	Learn fitness activities to incorporate into their sessions
Social Work	Observe behavior and environment

Note. AAfA = Adaptive Activities for All

motor clinic at Western Illinois University (WIU) is a multidisciplinary collaborative program with a three-fold purpose: (a) provide motor instruction for students with disabilities from the West Central Illinois Special Education Cooperative (WCISEC), (b) serve as pre-professional practica for various majors at WIU, and (c) promote education and advocacy for students with disabilities while serving as a resource for the WIU campus. Each semester, WIU hosts eight Friday morning sessions for WCISEC students in a campus gym. During sessions, WCISEC students receive a session of music therapy and two sessions of physical instruction, pre-planned by WIU students, with specific individualized adaptations. WCISEC students range in age from 4 to 21 years old, the majority of whom have autism spectrum disorder (ASD) with mild to extensive support needs. WIU students from various majors participate in AAfA to meet program needs. Table 1 provides a list of program majors and their purpose for participating in AAfA. Regardless of program, the AAfA program supports WIU students in learning skills that align with their university program learning goals and transfer to their future careers.

During the preparation stage, a team of WIU faculty WCISEC staff are identified to plan the logistics of the program, including scheduling sessions, assessing equipment needs, and leading orientation activities. Orientation activities include introducing sample lesson plans, leading games and activities for WIU teacher candidates to understand how to work with WCISEC students, and introducing teacher candidates to WCISEC students by reviewing disability, communication, and behavior characteristics of each student. Gaining an understanding of the purpose of the clinic, adapting lessons to respond to the individual strengths and needs of students with disabilities, and working to co-create lessons with peers they have just met are critical components to a successful semester.

During the action phase, faculty and staff informally observe AAfA sessions, give feedback, support the environment, and suggest adaptations. After each session, WIU teacher candidates and faculty participate in reflection time, allowing for adjustment of future lesson plans based on feedback and their own experiences working directly with WCISEC students. Historically, reflections and feedback have been informal; howev-

er, formal data collection from WIU students, WIU faculty, and WCISEC staff is planned for the future to inform the program's design to fit the needs of all involved. The demonstration phase varies for each WIU university student depending on academic program, but all participate in some form of demonstration through writing papers, sharing information informally with peers, or giving formal presentations.

The AAfA program began in the mid-to-late 1990s as an experience for pre-professional physical education teachers to receive direct experience with students with disabilities. In the early 2000s, WCISEC sought to reinvest in Adapted Physical Education for their students by initiating the relationship with WIU. In 2013, the cross-disciplinary nature was added as the Speech Pathology and Audiology (SPA) program was introduced to AAfA. Seeing the benefits for students in both the Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) and SPA programs was the catalyst for seeking more collaborative options from different programs across campus. This ensured that WCISEC students were well supported for their motor activities and could receive one-on-one instruction and support. The goal

is to support 45 to 60 WCISEC students, while also connecting the experience to coursework and professional activities for WIU students.

Informal observation and assessment of the benefits of AAfA for WIU students drove the decision to include more programs from across the university, including the Special Education (SPED) program. The inclusion of SPED in AAfA has enhanced the degree program to allow teacher candidates to practice collaboration in authentic situations. The AAfA program has evolved over time, and will continue to evolve, to meet the educational needs of WIU teacher candidates and to serve the WCISEC student population. As such, it has also evolved to align with CBSL principles. Ensuring the needs of both WIU teacher candidates and WCISEC students speaks to the reciprocal nature of the program, and allowing WIU teacher candidates to serve as role models and educators to WCISEC students highlights civic engagement opportunities. Likewise, participation of WIU teacher candidates in orientation and learning-through-doing serves as a unique form of professional development while working alongside other education related disciplines.

For WCISEC students, five key benefits have been identified: (a) engagement in physical activity, (b) introduction to a new learning environment, (c) participation and learning in skills not otherwise available in their schools or extracurricular activities, (d) attainment of independence and transition skills, and (e) discovery of personal strengths and weaknesses. Observations show WCISEC students have gained prerequisite skills for other activities, such as music and sports, in an environment rich with color, fun, and engaging leaders. WCISEC students also practice appropriate transitions between activities and work on communicating their needs,

both non-verbal and verbal, to people who are new to them. WCISEC students also receive continuous positive reinforcement, which encourages them to persevere on new activities that might be outside of their comfort zone.

For WIU teacher candidates, three professional readiness benefits have emerged: (a) gaining teamwork skills, participating in new experiences, and adapting to situational or student needs. The interdisciplinary nature of AAfA leads to teamwork skills, while teacher candidates learn to adapt under pressure in cases when one of their teammates misses a session due to illness, or an unanticipated WCISEC student support need is revealed. They learn communication skills for engaging with diverse learners that include beginning sign language or use of alternative communication devices- techniques and equipment that they may not have access to otherwise. Teacher candidates also learn flexibility in instructional delivery as they “think on the fly” in order to adjust to student needs or new situations as they arise. Adapting skills in the moment is an important component of professional life for all of these candidates.

Reciprocity is a benefit and a highlight of AAfA, as everyone interacts in an environment not available to either entity outside of the program. WIU fills an important partnership role as they provide opportunities for WCISEC students to learn, grow, practice independence, communicate, meet new people, collaborate, and learn prerequisite skills with increased support and positive reinforcement. Both WIU and WCISEC students practice new skills, in a new environment, using a teamwork model. While WIU teacher candidates practice delivering positive reinforcement, WCISEC students discover new strengths and skills. As WIU teacher candidates experience opportunities for real-time adaptation, WCISEC students

receive individualized instruction that leads to new skills. Both sets of students are experience authentic interactions and leave the gym each Friday with a shared sense of purpose and achievement.

### **Case example 3: SUNY Buffalo State University AuSome Programming**

AuSome events were launched in 2010, guided by Chambers and Lavery’s (2012) four elements of effective service and CBSL: preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration. These events were developed collaboratively with community partners to provide inclusive, welcoming, and judgment-free recreational experiences for children with ASD or sensory regulation challenges.

A professor from SUNY Buffalo State’s Exceptional Education department and a program developer for individuals with ASD partnered with venues willing to offer sensory-friendly public experiences. The professor secured site agreements and provided training to staff at each venue to create autism-friendly environments. These events are now embedded in graduate special education coursework and highlight the value of CBSL to teacher candidates. Regularly scheduled programs include monthly events like *AuSome Evenings at the Museum*, semesterly events such as *AuSome Adventures at the Aquarium*, and annual gatherings like a summer picnic.

Program volunteers include graduate-level in-service teacher candidates. Program participants include children with ASD or sensory needs, their caregivers, neurotypical peers, guests, and community partners. Events typically draw 100–300 attendees and are supported by 6–15 graduate students and a faculty member. Events are specifically tailored to sensory needs, with accommodations like reduced guest capacity (25–50%), private access to venues, muted lighting and noise, and quiet

spaces for self-regulation. These measures reduce overstimulation and are key to the success of the events.

The most impactful element of AuSome events is the involvement of trained graduate students. These candidates are in a special education master's program and are pursuing certification. Their coursework includes service-learning components that provide hands-on training in making accommodations and activity modifications that promote participation and enjoyment, effectively linking theory to practice.

Graduate candidates play a vital role in all stages of the events. While venues offer space and a willingness to engage with neurodiverse populations, staff at these venues often lack training in behavioral and educational supports. The graduate students fill this gap by collaborating with the venue staff and families—encouraging communication, social interactions, and play, modeling strategies for caregivers who rarely witness these interactions firsthand. The events also provide a low-pressure setting for teacher candidates to practice caregiver engagement, building confidence for future interactions during conferences or IEP meetings.

As part of their coursework, candidates create supplementary materials such as choice boards, communication cards, visual schedules, social narratives, task analyses for crafts, rules with graphics, and color-coded maps. These visual supports foster communication, reduce anxiety, and increase understanding of rules and routines. Developing these materials strengthens candidates' ability to provide classroom accommodations and apply event-tested strategies in their own P–12 classrooms.

Reflection is a core component of CBSL. After each event, candidates participate in structured reflection sessions both on-site and during class. They respond to questions like “What

surprised you?” or “What was your key takeaway?” In addition, they complete individual and group written reflections and present summary slides in the final class. Candidates also complete surveys featuring both Likert-scale and open-ended questions to inform program assessment.

Initial AuSome programming was informed by collaborating with caregivers to conduct focus groups. Concurrently, the university professor completed training in service-learning pedagogy, emphasizing reflective practice. From a modest start, the program quickly expanded to a monthly calendar of events across varied venues and activities, including yoga, sensory story times, and visits to cultural institutions. The initiative has grown with support from grants, donations, and partnerships, and its model is easily replicable by other universities. Since 2010, AuSome events have evolved to match available funding, partner growth, and participant feedback, strengthening sustainability and outreach while maintaining robust impact on current and future teachers.

AuSome's growing list of community partners includes museums, aquariums, theaters, libraries, farms, and organizations offering activities like swimming, yoga, music, and art. These partners are mission-driven, promoting accessibility and inclusion. As part of the collaboration, they help with outreach and provide safe spaces for families who may otherwise avoid overstimulating environments. Partners appreciate the professional training provided by graduate students and reflect regularly with faculty to ensure events are mutually beneficial. Their feedback informs program improvements and supports ongoing development.

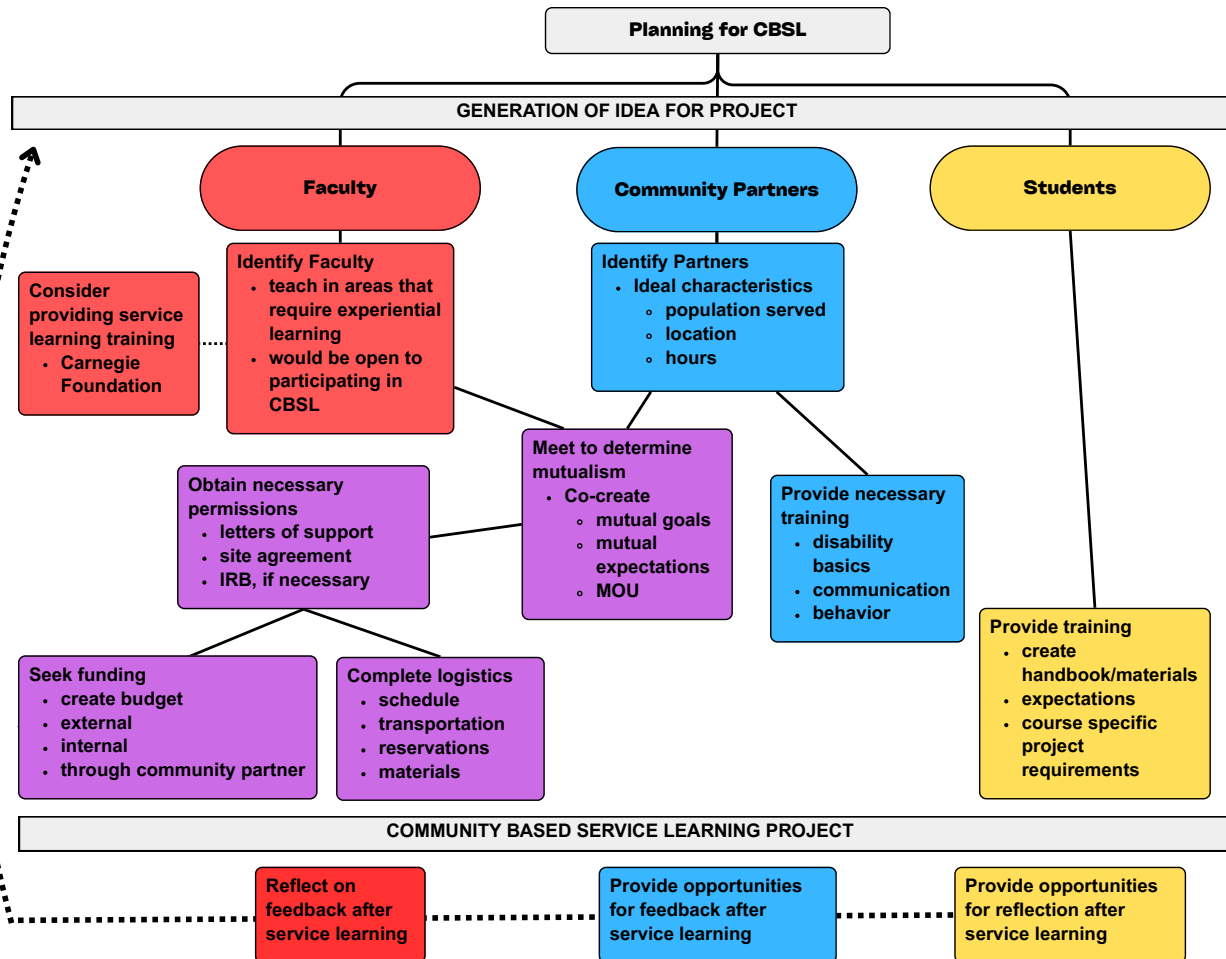
The collaborative experiences brought about through AuSome events offer significant benefits. For teacher candidates, they provide authentic experience with

neurodivergent children in non-classroom settings, build confidence in communicating with families, and sharpen collaboration skills. For children, the events offer safe, supportive recreational activities where they are welcomed and respected. For caregivers, the events reduce isolation and offer shared enjoyment with all family members. For faculty, AuSome events enrich curriculum with experiential learning, provide insight into student-teacher interactions in real-world contexts, foster community ties, and fulfill professional standards set by organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children.

## APPLICATION FOR PRACTICE

Collaboration with community-based partners offers teacher candidates useful service-learning experiences. CBSL is distinct and separate from traditional clinical pre-service teaching experiences (Williams & Lee, 2020). Such experiences enhance special education educator preparation as they lead to teacher candidate identity development, awareness of community resources, and willingness to collaborate with the community to serve the whole child. Faculty and community partners also realize the benefits of participating in CBSL, which makes it a reasonable and effective method for teaching in educator preparation programs.

In Figure 2 below, the authors have illustrated possible steps and considerations for implementing CBSL, based on the Effective Stages of DBSL (see Figure 1). This flowchart can be utilized as a template for programs and faculty who are interested in beginning a project in their own contexts. Each of the three case examples followed similar planning steps, while having different progressions and methods. To identify faculty participants, the CPED program utilized those faculty who were leading

**FIGURE 2:** Planning Model for CBSL Implementation in Special Education Teacher Preparation

practicum courses, while the AuSome program had a faculty member who was trained to offer service-learning coursework. Both the CPED and AAfA programs chose community partners based on their proximity to the university, as well as the roles those organizations already had in serving children with disabilities in the community. To ensure mutuality, the AAfA program provides the teacher candidates with important experiential learning in person with students with disabilities. In return, the university provides the partner agency with a free service of high-quality motor activities, which they would normally need to contract and pay for.

As pointed out via these three case examples, there are many logistical

items that must be considered prior to the actual CBSL activities taking place. Items such as creating memoranda of understanding (MOU), producing schedules, arranging transportation, reserving necessary equipment and/or spaces, obtaining permissions from organizations and the university, and budgeting and seeking/obtaining funding are all considerations that can take considerable amounts of time and require significant collaboration. For the CPED case example, scheduling partnerships each semester begins with a short conversation to determine how the university can best support the partner organization and discuss what the volunteerism can look like at the current time. Some programs, like the AAfA case example, find that planning

logistics as a team effort with faculty, student participants, and representation from the community agency is beneficial to maintaining mutual benefit for all entities involved. While this may be beneficial, it can also take longer than simply having a faculty member do it alone. Each project will have different logistical needs, so it is best to begin planning early and be thorough.

Another critical aspect of CBSL is providing training to individuals or organizations that require it. This can present as explicit teaching about disabilities, as in the AuSome program's autism training that is provided to all employees in partner agencies, to training candidates in content or organization-specific requirements. For example, in the CPED program, each

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community partner provides tours of their facilities, informational presentations, and training on how they support community needs. While the AAfA program does not contain explicit training, teacher candidates participate in an orientation that includes sample lesson plans, practice leading activities that are appropriate for the student population with which they will work, and learn the disability, behavior, and communication characteristics of the students.

Reflection that is completed by all participating teacher candidates, community partners, and faculty is the final critical piece in the cycle of CBSL. Teacher candidates should be given the opportunity to reflect often throughout the project, as these opportunities help them develop their skills and relate the experience to their own background knowledge and their future careers as teachers (Chamber & Lavery, 2012). Culminating projects, such as AuSome's written reflections and slideshow presentations of their experiences, not only help teacher candidates contextualize what they have learned but also provide feedback regarding the project as a whole. It is also vital to solicit reflective feedback from community partners upon completion of the project so that it can be used to determine strengths and areas for improvement in the next iteration. All the case examples use either in-person meetings or electronic surveys to gather feedback at the conclusion of each project.

Community-based Service Learning has many benefits for aspiring teachers, teacher educators, and the communities in which they live and work. The collaborative case examples and information presented here demonstrate that CBSL is not only effective for teacher preparation, but it is also achievable within the confines of teacher education programming in higher education. Hopefully, readers are inspired to take the next steps toward undertaking a project within their contexts that will meet the needs of their teacher candidates and community

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# Leveraging Integration and Collaboration with the Arts to Enhance Teacher Preparation

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## ABSTRACT

Traditional collaborations between schools and teacher preparation programs provide real-world experiences for teacher candidates and contribute to their professional learning. However, when preparing candidates to work with the whole child, one must also consider things outside the typical classroom. Preparing candidates to work with families, support students in community settings, and explore their own learning, attitudes, and experiences can be accomplished through unique collaboration opportunities, as well. In this article, faculty from three teacher preparation programs describe three very different collaborations utilizing visual and performing arts resources to enhance teacher candidate knowledge and skills. We categorize these collaborations into two groups related to candidates' professional learning: skill building and skill application. Activity descriptions are provided and benefits and concerns regarding each partnership are discussed.

## KEYWORDS

**Collaboration, professional development, simulation, teacher education, teacher preparation, visual and performing arts**

**D**r. Wright sat quietly in her office, reviewing teacher candidate feedback from her latest course evaluations. She began to sense a familiar challenge emerging. “We learned so much this semester, but I would have liked to have seen ways we could do this every day in our classrooms,” one said. Another responded, “We really like Dr. Wright, she definitely knows her material, but I just wish the class was more engaging and included things outside of Reading, Math, and Writing.” A third stated, “We have learned so much about how to work with our students with disabilities in the classroom, but what about when we are at recess, or art, or music?”

Dr. Wright thought about her own outside interests in theater, music, and art—many of which her teacher candidates shared—and an idea sparked: what if she could harness the arts and partners in the local art community not just as supplemental activities, but as fundamental components woven throughout her coursework? She knew K-12 students with disabilities and their families who would benefit from greater access to theater, writing, and visual arts to express their interests. Many of these same children struggled with reading and writing but flourished when it came to the arts. She considered how she might invest in interdisciplinary collaborations in the arts to deepen her teacher candidates' experiences. These questions soon led her and her candidates on a powerful journey, reshaping perceptions of teaching, learning, and the transformative role of the arts in special education teacher preparation.

Teacher preparation programs increasingly emphasize interdisciplinary collaboration as a fundamental requirement for teaching effectiveness. Teacher candidates who connect with community resources develop a better understanding of students' lives, which extends past the classroom environment (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2023). These collaborations enable teacher candidates to grasp the multifaceted nature of their students and families, leading to better community relationships and

more meaningful connections (Murawski & Scott, 2023).

A core element of effective teacher training is practice-based experience that connects academic theory and evidence-based instructional methods to practical classroom application (McLesky et al., 2017). Direct application of knowledge occurs through authentic experiences, where candidates can practice and enhance their instructional skills across various real-world teaching settings (Grossman et al., 2009). Further, through practice-based experiences in authentic environments, teacher candidates can develop essential and inclusive relationships with diverse student populations through their direct interactions with students and families (Cone, 2012).

The integration of arts-based learning into teacher preparation programs offers a dynamic and multidimensional approach to teacher development by fostering creativity, critical thinking, and socioemotional learning. Arts-based learning refers to the intentional use of artistic practices—such as visual arts, music, drama, movement, and storytelling—as pedagogical strategies that enhance learning beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries (Zhou & Hartline, 2023). These approaches allow for the inclusion of diverse modes of teaching and learning, enabling teacher candidates to design instruction that accommodates varied student needs and learning preferences, including those of students with disabilities (Catterall, 2022). By engaging in arts-integrated practices, teacher candidates can develop more inclusive and differentiated instructional strategies, rooted in experiential and expressive learning. Research has shown that arts-based learning supports student engagement, fosters critical and creative thinking skills, and facilitates deeper connections to academic content (Allina, 2018; Ogden et al., 2010).

Additionally, these approaches en-

courage teacher candidates to explore their identities and interests beyond the traditional classroom setting, contributing to increased motivation, professional self-awareness, and the development of practical teaching skills (Ogden et al., 2010). When used intentionally, arts integration provides innovative strategies that promote embodied learning, collaboration, emotional engagement, and authentic application of theory to practice, thereby enriching the overall teacher preparation experience (Donahue & Stuart, 2024). Thus, teacher preparation programs can extend their areas of focus beyond traditional topics by exploring collaborative partnerships that include community-based and arts-focused organizations.

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This article explores three unique collaborations in teacher preparation programs, each leveraging visual and performing arts resources. These initiatives demonstrate significant benefits in skill-building and practical application while also addressing challenges associated with interdisciplinary and experiential partnerships. Through detailed descriptions and reflective analyses, this article highlights how strategic collaborations in the arts can enhance teacher preparation, particularly within special education contexts, through three examples: (a) improv acting simulation, (b) visual expression via cartooning, and (c) art museum-based field experiences. The first two examples focus on skill *building*, while the third example focuses on skill *application*.

## EXAMPLE 1: IMPROV ACTING TO IMPROVE COLLABORATION SKILLS

*Dr. Wright remembered attending a presentation at the Teacher Education Division conference conducted by a faculty member who partnered with local actors on simulated role play exercises*

*with teacher candidates. That faculty member, Dr. Wilkinson, shared how her teacher candidates expressed fear and apprehension when entering meetings with parents of their future students. She relayed how one student stated, “I am so nervous, what do I do if she starts talking about her ex-husband?” Dr. Wilkinson smiled and said, “Try to keep the conversation focused on the child. Redirect back to the goals, the accommodations, and ask her questions about strategies she uses at home to keep Samuel focused on his homework.” Dr. Wright was eager to learn how her own teacher candidates might engage with actors in a similar way to develop their application of the high leverage practices for collaboration. Many of her candidates had expressed anxiety about their field experiences and asked, “When will we actually work with families?” Dr. Wright hoped simulation experiences with real actors would reduce their apprehension and provide opportunities for the candidates to practice their collaboration skills. She was eager to learn from Dr. Wilkinson’s work.*

## Purpose of Improv Acting in Teacher Preparation

While teacher candidates receive many opportunities to engage with students during their time in the field, most do not get the opportunity to interact with families (Mancenido & Pello, 2020). Collaborating with actors who can take on the part of a parent during a simulation or role play allows teacher candidates to practice engaging with parents and family members in a safe space (Wilkinson & Potts, 2022). In this example, the teacher preparation program partnered with actors from the local theater community to simulate such interactions. Buffalo, New York has a prolific theater district. Through connections between the department chair and the Theatre Alliance of Buffalo (TAB), a partnership was secured with

**TABLE 1:** HLPs used during simulations

Domain	Pillar HLPs addressed	Embedded HLPs addressed
1: Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HLP 1: Collaborate with professionals to increase student success.</li> <li>HLP 3: Collaborate with families to support student learning and secure needed services.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HLP 2: Organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families.</li> </ul>
2: Data-Driven Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HLP 6: Use student assessment data, analyze instructional practices, and make necessary adjustments that improve student outcomes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HLP 4: Use multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of a student's strengths and needs.</li> <li>HLP 5: Interpret and communicate assessment information to collaboratively design and implement educational programs.</li> <li>HLP 11: Identify and prioritize long- and short-term learning goals.</li> </ul>

several actors who were well trained in improvisation acting. The actors were brought in to a “Methods of Inclusion” course where they took on the role of a parent or guardian during a culminating improvisation activity. While not required, many of the actors were also parents or had some teaching experience. Actors were modestly compensated for their service using funds collected from a small lab fee in the methods course.

One of the learning outcomes for the three-credit hour methods course involves candidates learning about effective collaboration with colleagues, staff, families, and community agencies. Throughout the semester, and prior to the end-of-semester simulation, candidates work with a partner or a small group to complete activities that focus on building communication skills and interpersonal problem-solving. These activities include scenarios involving different communication and conflict management strategies as well as the development of co-taught lesson plans.

Candidates also read articles about a variety of collaboration situations, complete online modules regarding collaboration from The IRIS Center, and explore related High Leverage Practices (HLPs; Aceves & Kennedy, 2024). The HLPs targeted for this activity fall under Domain One: *Collaboration* and Domain Two: *Data-driven planning*. See Table 1 for a list of additional HLPs and how they are addressed in this course.

### The Simulation Experience

The culminating simulation experience with the improv actors and teacher candidates occurs at the end of the term. Candidates meet with one or two actors who are portraying family members of a fictional student during an IEP team meeting. To prepare, teacher candidates are introduced to the roles and responsibilities of each person on the IEP team, including the student and the parent or guardian. The simulations require each teacher candidate to take on a role as either a general education or special edu-

cation teacher. These roles are randomly assigned approximately a week before the simulations occur. The actors are made aware of the course goals related to communication and collaboration and both the actors and teacher candidates are provided with a short scenario regarding the IEP team, the plan, and background information for a target student (see Figure 1). Background information includes case-specific details such as assessment data, class observations, and a brief family history.

During the simulation, there are no scripts or prompts other than what is provided in the scenario and case information. Candidates are encouraged to prepare talking points, including any visual representations of data they feel will be helpful to the conversation. The actors are asked to step into the roles of parent or guardian for each situation. Given the limited context provided to both candidates and the actors, the actors are given free rein to deepen the family’s backstory, even adding details about their own character’s life.

For each scenario, the teacher candidates have two options from which to choose: *mild* or *challenge*. Only one simulation is required per candidate. The actors prepare for both options as candidates might change their decision on simulation day. During a mild scenario, an actor might shed a tear or two, but the conversation is relatively amiable. The parent or guardian is more willing to go along with the teachers’ suggestions for the student’s activities and goals in school. However, during a challenge scenario, the actor can become more frustrated or combative in speech. They might be argumentative and resist suggestions made by the teachers. The actor might increase their volume, and their tone might be critical of the other adults in the room. The actor could also decide to sob uncontrollably, displaying grief or frustration related to the situation. If

**FIGURE 1:** Sample Scenario used During Simulated IEP Meeting**Teagan's Scenario:**

*You and your co-teacher are meeting with Teagan's aunt about his behavioral goals for this upcoming school year. You may want to discuss your thoughts/recommendations on his placement and related services. Be ready to discuss strategies you will use in the classroom to help Teagan with social skills.*

*Review your case and IEP carefully. Prepare for a **conversation, not a monologue**. Prepare for questions and a discussion. After reading the case, what issues **might** come up during this conversation? Keep the aunt's perspective and role in Teagan's life in mind as you prepare to speak with her.*

**FIGURE 2:** Simulation reflection prompts

**Directions: Use the prompts below to reflect on your simulation experience in a 2-3 page paper.**

1. What is your initial reaction to this meeting?
2. Which Collaboration HLPs were most evident during your experience? Why do you think these presented themselves?
3. Which Data-driven planning HLPs were most evident during your experience? Why do you think these presented themselves?
4. Was there a particular communication or collaboration strategy you used that was effective?
5. Was there a particular communication or collaboration strategy you used that was ineffective?
6. Were there any cultural considerations you kept in mind during this meeting?
7. Were there any cultural considerations you should have thought about that you did not consider?
8. Do you feel you left the meeting on good terms with the family? Why or why not?
9. Describe something you learned about yourself as a result of this experience.
10. Identify 1 communication, collaboration, or general professional disposition skill you want to develop moving forward based on this experience.

two actors are present, they might argue with each other, completely ignoring the teacher candidates.

In a challenge scenario, teacher candidates will need to display increased levels of empathy and compassion while still trying to get their talking points across. Because the actors are trained in improvisation, they are ready to change their mood and dialogue based on the candidates' response to an emotional outburst. Actors might move from anger to acceptance based on a candidate's

display of empathy. Alternatively, the actor might shift from passive complacency to indignation if the teacher candidate implies that a problem stems from home rather than a school incident. These unanticipated reactions from the actors keep teacher candidates on guard. The experience pushes them out of their comfort zone into a much more realistic situation in which they have no idea how the parent or guardian might act. It should be noted that the teacher candidates have known one another for

approximately two to three years at this point and tend to have a level of comfort with their peers before, during, and after this activity.

Each simulated IEP meeting lasts approximately 20 minutes and is recorded using university-adopted software. After the simulation is complete, the teacher candidates are asked to independently watch their own video and write a two-to-three-page paper connecting the experience back to course content. Candidates are given a list of prompts to guide their reflection paper (see Figure 2). This serves as the final assignment for the course.

### Outcomes for Teacher Candidates

The main goals for these simulations are to build collaboration skills and make connections to the HLPs. In their reflections, many teacher candidates express fears and anxieties they had about going into the simulated meeting. The uncertainty of this experience pushes candidates to use the collaboration skills they have been working on throughout the semester. The teacher candidates are no longer engaging with the predictable, genial classmates with whom they have interacted for two or three semesters. They have absolutely no indication of what the actor might say or do until it happens. However, as they continue to reflect, they note relief at having had this experience. They comment on how preparation for the simulated meeting allowed them to continually address any concerns brought up by the actors.

Many candidates attribute success in their simulation to utilizing a strengths-based approach when discussing the student with family members. Teacher candidates view the actor as more "at ease" with the conversation when candidates are identifying the student's strengths. They acknowledge that they can literally see the actor "tense up"

when they must address something that could be perceived as negative or deficit related. Improvised dialogue aside, the body language displayed by the actors allows them to convey emotions the candidates would not be able to receive or interpret from classmate simulations alone.

Regarding the goals of the Methods of Inclusion course, the actor participation allows our teacher candidates to actively explore the three HLPs in the Collaboration domain (Aceves & Kennedy, 2024). During the meeting, candidates must practice taking turns speaking and asking questions to ensure everyone feels heard. In addition, they recognize and discuss how teachers use HLPs from the Data-Driven Planning domain (Aceves & Kennedy, 2024) to facilitate meetings. Candidates often bring visual representations of data into the simulations to help explain connections between goals and student performance. Building their skills in the pillar and embedded HLPs in both domains will help these future teachers to support students with disabilities throughout their careers. Although they are not working with actual families, this actor collaboration bridges the gap between research and practice for the teacher candidates in a safe space of learning.

## **EXAMPLE 2: CARTOONING TO IMPROVE IMAGINATION, EMPATHY, AND REFLECTION**

*After exploring the simulated experiences of Dr. Wilkinson's teacher candidates, Dr. Wright became even more interested in incorporating the arts into her special education methods coursework. A common question that Dr. Wright often heard from her teacher candidates about teaching students with disabilities in general education settings was, "But what does that look like?" Her candidates understood the importance of inclusion and individualizing in-*

*struction, but many struggled to imagine how that looked in practice. Dr. Wright realized her teacher candidates needed more opportunities to reflect, empathize, and imagine if they were to move beyond surface-level understandings of the theory and evidence-based practices they were learning in her classes. She wanted to investigate ways to support her teacher candidates to develop the imagination, empathy, and critically reflective practice necessary to create the unique learning supports and environments that each of their future students would need. This inspired her to explore the use of drawing in her teacher preparation courses. Dr. Wright arranged a meeting to learn more about the collaboration between nationally renowned cartoonist and art faculty member, Lynda Barry, and Dr. Bubash, a teacher educator, to integrate drawing activities into special education methods courses. The goal of the collaboration was to help teacher candidates imagine inclusive educational settings that centered the voices and needs of their students.*

### **Purpose of Integrated Visual Arts for Teacher Candidates**

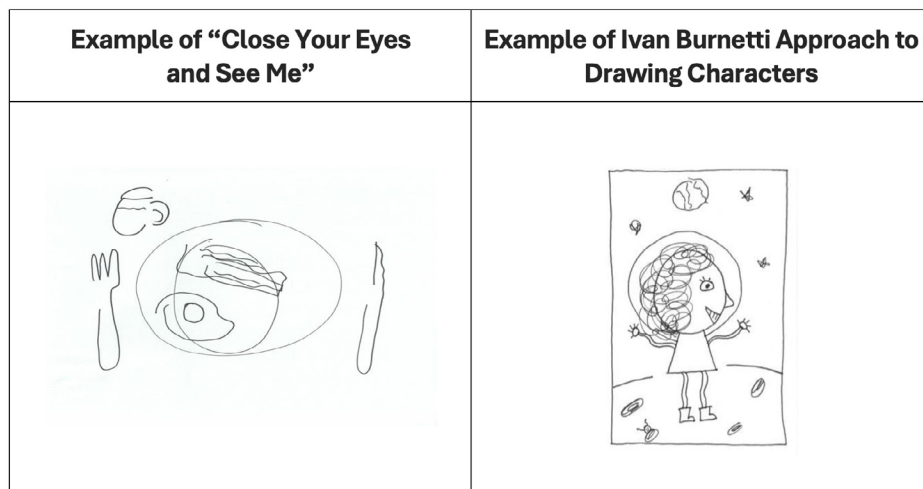
Arts-based approaches such as drawing and cartooning are promising ways to cultivate an imaginative and reflective mindset. Incorporating visual image-based arts activities into teacher preparation can increase knowledge retention by encouraging candidates to engage deeply and connect emotionally with the material (Zoss et al., 2010). Further, drawing offers teacher candidates a way to examine their assumptions, challenge their beliefs, and deepen their understanding of themselves and their students. Lynda Barry (2014) frames drawing not as a demonstration of talent but as a process of discovery, as it helps us understand what we see, what we think we see, and what that reveals about our perceptions. She explains, "Some-

thing happens to my thinking when I start to draw. It becomes more like listening than formulating" (Barry, 2008, p. 157). This shift mirrors the goals of critical reflection in teacher education: slowing down, noticing, questioning, and interpreting. Encouraging teacher candidates to listen first supports not only their critical reflection, but also their ability to imagine while using empathy to center the voice and experience of students with disabilities. Building on this, Dr. Bubash collaborated with Lynda Barry to integrate Barry's cartooning methods into a special education methods course.

The methods course focuses on evidence-based strategies to help special education teachers meet the individual needs of students with disabilities while aligning instruction with grade-level content in general education settings. Barry and Dr. Bubash held biweekly meetings to plan which drawing activities, adapted from Barry's own teaching practices as outlined in *Making Comics* (Barry, 2019), would best support course objectives. Between meetings, the pair communicated through email when immediate feedback was needed. These ongoing conversations also helped provide a space to collaboratively interpret the comics created by the teacher candidates and to refine future activities.

### **Building a Safe and Accessible Drawing Environment**

Before diving into the core drawing activities, it is important to prioritize building a classroom environment where drawing feels playful, accessible, and emotionally safe. For many teacher candidates, drawing is scary. Further, many teacher candidates might not have drawn since they were in lower elementary school. With this in mind, it is important for the teacher educator to create a joyful and collaborative atmosphere, which includes the teacher educator drawing

**FIGURE 3:** Classroom Drawing Activities

alongside their teacher candidates.

An easy introductory drawing activity is called “Close Your Eyes and See Me” (Barry, 2019). Every candidate receives a blank sheet of paper and a pen. A timer is set for one minute and candidates are asked to draw a familiar object from memory with their eyes closed. Barry suggests starting with a “bacon and egg breakfast with coffee, toast, and silverware” (p. 54), but you can choose anything. Once finished, teacher candidates show their drawings to those around them. This exercise invites laughter and, as Barry (2019) suggests, helps teacher candidates “make friends with the lines their hand naturally makes” (p. 55). See Figure 3 for an example.

Another strategy involves introducing a method for drawing people without using stick figures, which Barry does not allow. Instead, Barry suggests using cartoonist Ivan Brunetti’s approach: characters made from two basic shapes for the head and body, “noodle” shapes for limbs, and optional details (see Figure 3 for an example). When integrating drawing into teacher preparation coursework, drawing in every class is not mandatory, but it is highly encouraged. Even short activities, such as drawing oneself doing something (e.g., playing an instrument, floating in space) for three minutes

while attendance is taken, can help build comfort and routine. Teacher candidates also mentioned that short activities used at the beginning of class helped relieve some of the stress of the day, allowing them to be more present in the teacher education classroom. Once a playful, accessible, and emotionally safe environment is established, the drawing activities can transition to connecting directly to course content. The following is an example of one of the structured activities adapted and delivered in class as an alternative way for teacher educators to check for understanding and for teacher candidates to begin applying their learning without a direct field placement or classroom.

### **Embedding Structured Drawing Activities Connected to Course Content**


One of the main objectives of this special education methods course is for teacher candidates to practice person-centered planning. Person-centered planning is a collaborative process in which students with disabilities, their families, and educators share information about the student’s strengths, preferences, interests, needs, and goals. This information then guides the design of curriculum, instruction, and learning

environments (Wells & Sheehey, 2012). The Review Frame (Barry, 2019) was adapted to help teacher candidates reflect on their understanding of person-centered planning and imagine themselves applying the components of person-centered planning in their classrooms. When teacher candidates complete the Review Frame activity, the teacher educator can see how they understand person-centered planning and determine what additional support they might need to put their new learning into practice.

The Review Frame uses a vertical single sheet of paper. First, teacher candidates divide the top two-thirds of the paper into two equal vertical boxes. Each box is numbered one through seven to prepare teacher candidates to create two separate lists. In the bottom third of the paper, two smaller vertical boxes are also added. These bottom two boxes are left blank. Once the Review Frame structure is complete, the top left box is labeled “Information” and teacher candidates are instructed to spend three minutes writing seven things they remembered or that stood out to them from the readings they completed. The top right quadrant is labeled “Visualized.” In this box, candidates are instructed to spend three minutes writing seven things they visualized from the readings. In the bottom left quadrant, candidates are given thirty seconds to write a quote or phrase that stayed with them from the readings. Finally, in the bottom right quadrant, teacher candidates are asked to spend thirty seconds drawing a simple image that captured a key idea from the readings. See Figure 4 for a Review Frame completed by a teacher candidate.

Once the Review Frame has been completed, teacher candidates select a single idea or image from the “Information” or “Visualized” list that is particularly vivid to them or that they want to explore in more depth. In the example

**FIGURE 4:** Candidate Example of a Completed Review Frame Comic

	Points / Info	Visualized
1	Center the person	Sitting with the power at the table
2	Plan backwards	Mapping from the treasure
3	know why you use the systems / support	Clear pathways
4	Start w/ the end	Building plans before building foundation
5	Many + personal pathways to the goal	Flip books!
6	Make it meaningful	Personalized problems of special interest
7	Make it joyful	Children laughing
8	Give agency + autonomy	The word no
Sometimes they have so many nightmares they cannot dream.		

shown in Figure 4, this teacher candidate chose to explore “make it joyful” from her list. Teacher candidates then create a scene based on their choice. First, they divide a blank sheet of paper into four triangles by drawing a large X across the page. The X is used to help prevent them from focusing too much on the organization or completeness and encourage them to fully immerse themselves in the image. The teacher candidates are encouraged to write freely anywhere on the page as the teacher educator guides them through prompts exploring time,

setting, sensory details, and context adapted from *Making Comics* (Barry, 2019, pp.145-46). For example, questions such as “If you turn your head and look to the right, what do you see?” can help the teacher candidates build a vivid mental image of themselves engaging in person-centered planning and teaching.

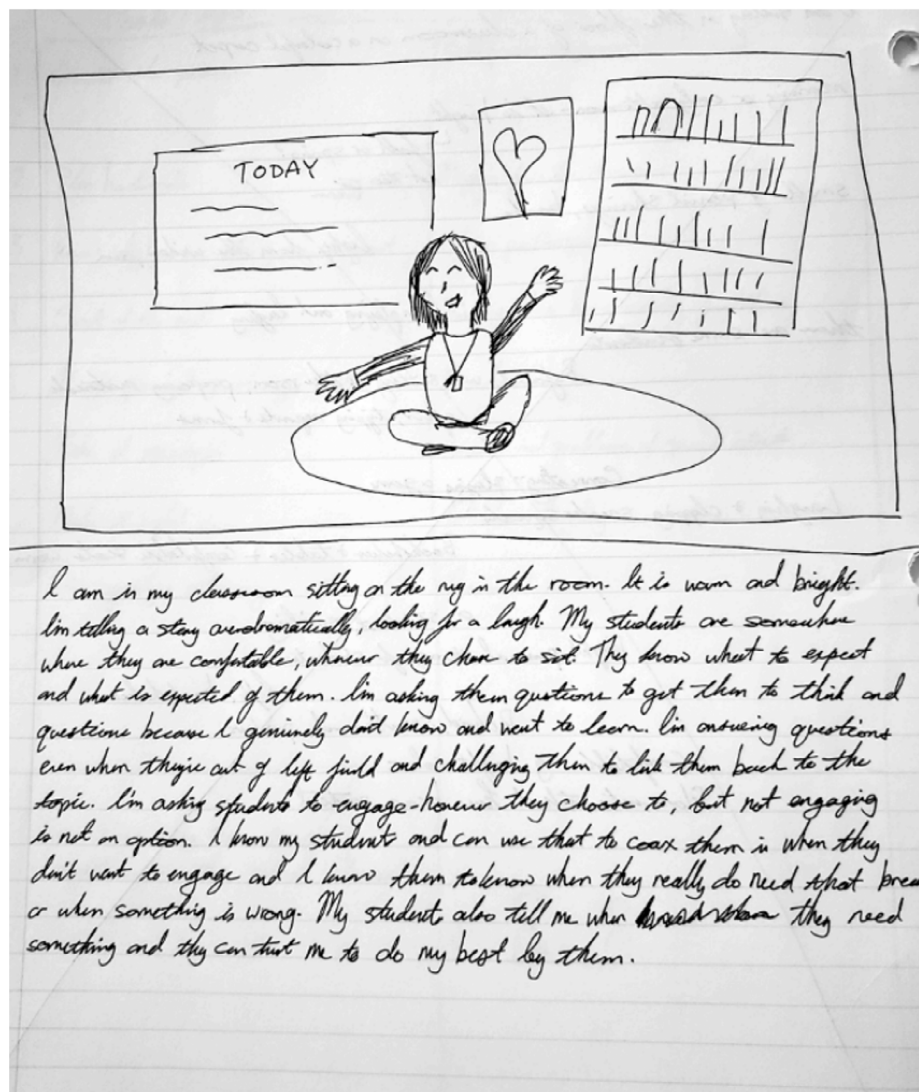
In the final step, teacher candidates use their thinking from the guided prompts to turn their imagined moment into a one-page comic. Given a third blank vertical sheet of paper, they draw a horizontal line across the middle of

the paper, splitting it into two sections. On the top half, a quarter inch frame is created to make a large box. Teacher candidates then take five minutes to draw themselves in the scene they imagined with as much detail as time allows. In the lower half, they spend five minutes writing about the scene they just drew in first-person, present tense, beginning with “I am...” and ending with a description of the scene’s setting. See Figure 5 for an example of the final comic.

### Outcomes for Teacher Educators and Teacher Candidates

By embedding drawing throughout a methods course, teacher educators created consistent and structured opportunities for teacher candidates to practice critical reflection, empathy, and imagination skills. The drawing activities also served as a way for the teacher educator to assess how well candidates understood the content and how they planned to apply it in the classroom. Through candidates’ comics, the teacher educator gained insights into how they internalized key concepts beyond what traditional assignments, such as written reflection papers or lesson plans, typically reveal. The visual and narrative components helped surface teacher candidates’ assumptions, goals, and values in relation to their future classrooms.

Additionally, teacher candidates reported high levels of engagement and emotional connection with the activities. One candidate described the Review Frame as a “helpful way for me to understand what my teaching philosophy is,” while another shared that they enjoyed the drawing process so much that they shared their work with peers and began using similar techniques in their own teaching placements. These responses suggest that cartooning not only supported conceptual understanding but also fostered confidence, creativity,

**FIGURE 5:** Final Comic Created by Teacher Candidate

and professional identity development. These candidate outcomes would not have been possible without the collaboration between two faculty: a nationally renowned cartoonist and art professor and a teacher educator.

### EXAMPLE 3: FIELD-BASED EXPERIENCE WITHIN AN INCLUSIVE SUMMER CAMP

Dr. Wright now had two innovative approaches for engaging her teacher candidates in skill development through the arts. Having enjoyed her community's local arts offerings, she wondered how she might expand her teacher can-

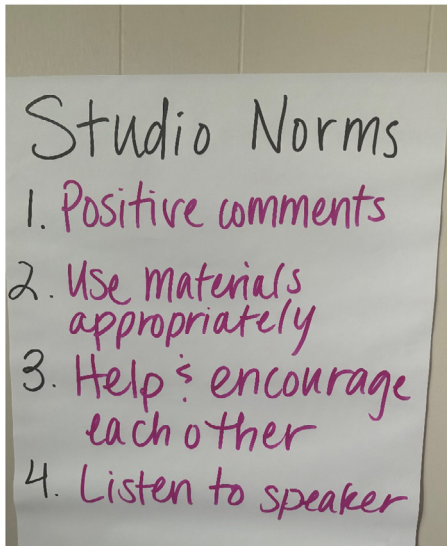
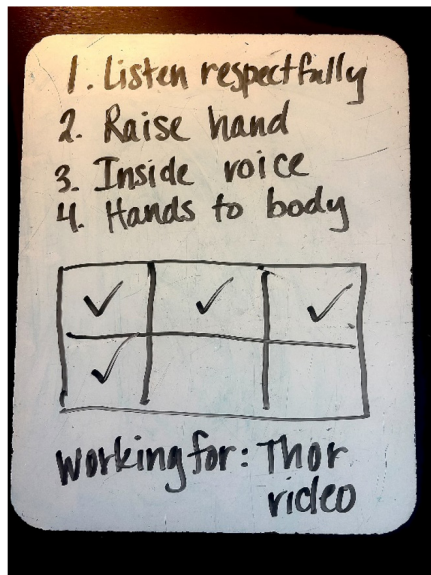
didates' experiences outside the university setting as well. She decided to visit Dr. Speight to learn about her collaborations with the arts community through an annual inclusive arts summer camp in Northwest Arkansas. This was a unique collaboration between a university special education program and a world-renowned museum of American art. Dr. Wright was most interested in understanding how teacher candidates were provided opportunities to practice implementation of evidence-based educational practices during the week of camp and how the museum art educators and university faculty partnered on

this initiative. She developed a few questions to ask Dr. Speight and her art education colleague, Miriam, during their remote video meeting. She was curious what training and support of candidates looked like during camp and how the two organizations worked together to deliver a cohesive camp experience.

### Purpose of Museum-based Field Experiences for Teacher Candidates

Each summer, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art delivers arts-based summer camps to Arkansas children and youth. For several years, the University of Arkansas (UA) has partnered with Crystal Bridges to deliver a week-long inclusive summer camp for children and youth ages 11-14 with disabilities (e.g., autism, ADHD, anxiety) as part of their regular summer programming. During the week of camp, campers create and view art aligned with a theme (e.g., biomes, home, architecture). The art creation activities take place in the studio where campers typically are seated in groups of three to four that share materials. During gallery time, campers visit and view pieces across museum exhibitions. While these learning experiences are designed by Crystal Bridges Museum educators, UA faculty bring their unique knowledge and expertise to enhance camper experiences. For example, a lesson on clay sculpting might be planned and delivered by Crystal Bridges educators with UA faculty suggesting adaptations to the lesson, such as presenting different sculpted objects or using different sculpting tools to strengthen camper engagement.

While the initial intent of the partnership was to provide inclusive camp experiences for children and youth with disabilities, it also presented an opportunity for an innovative field-based experience to foster skill development of teacher candidates. In recent years,

**FIGURE 6:** Studio Norms Poster**FIGURE 7:** Token System to Enhance Task Engagement

teacher candidates in UA special education preparation programs have facilitated this arts-based summer camp with support from faculty. Given the importance of field-based experiences for skill development (Leko & Brownell, 2011), educator preparation programs must identify contexts in which teacher candidates can practice using strategies with the support of a knowledgeable mentor. This partnership created a unique opportunity for faculty to support the devel-

opment of teacher candidates' skills for supporting children and youth with disabilities. These skills foster camper independence in art engagement, art creation, and relationship development during the inclusive arts-based camp and fall into three pillars: (a) behavior supports, (b) active engagement, and (3) social interactions.

### Enhancing Teacher Candidate Field-Based Experiences Behavior Supports

Camp experiences bring unique opportunities for teacher candidates to experience unfamiliar contexts. While the novel setting can facilitate engagement and excitement, there is also a strong possibility that campers will not have enough knowledge of the context to demonstrate expected behaviors. Crystal Bridges Museum of Art is similar to other museum contexts in that there are a number of rules or norms. To name a few, while in the gallery, visitors are expected to use a lower voice level, walk, keep hands off art, and take pictures without a flash. Campers with limited experience in these settings or with more intensive behavioral support needs might require additional support to follow the rules or norms outlined by the museum.

During the week of camp, UA teacher candidates and faculty work together with Crystal Bridges Museum educators to support campers in their demonstration of expected behaviors by creating and teaching norms, using pre-corrections, and providing positive acknowledgement when norms are demonstrated (Center on PBIS, 2022). The week begins with discussion about different camp contexts (i.e., gallery, studio) and brainstorming with the campers about what might be expected in each setting. The suggestions or ideas shared by the campers are then recorded on posters which are displayed throughout the week (see Figure 6).

As campers move across settings and activities, the posters are referenced as pre-corrections. These pre-corrections are particularly important as campers prepare to enter the gallery spaces. The pre-corrections can be provided to the group. For example, a teacher candidate might remind all campers, "Remember, when we are in the gallery we are going to use lower voice levels." They can also be provided to individuals, such as by reminding a specific camper, "Please keep in mind you can only bring pencils into the gallery." Our teacher candidates also positively acknowledge students when they are observed demonstrating the norms. For instance, they might say, "Thanks for staying with the group in the gallery," or "I appreciated the respect you showed during our studio discussion by raising your hand and waiting until you were called on." These supports support all campers in showing expected behaviors across different camp settings.

### Active Engagement

Throughout the week of camp, campers create art during studio time. Campers use a variety of mediums (e.g., clay, sketching, painting) to create their own unique studio projects aligned with a theme, such as *Home*, *Biomes*, or *Nature*. While the nature of studio time creates opportunities for campers to make choices, the flexibility of the experience and potential misalignment with their interests can create barriers to engagement. To support campers in engaging during studio time, UA teacher candidates are guided to look for opportunities to align studio activities with camper interests. For example, if campers are creating figures from clay to live in a camper-created home structure, a teacher candidate might suggest that a camper who enjoys video games could create a video game character. If campers are creating animals from recycled materials, a teacher candidate might help a camper who enjoys cats to identify different recyclable materi-

als they could use to create a cat, like using cardboard to make ears. To further support campers in completing tasks and sustaining engagement, teacher candidates are guided to assist with breaking down complex tasks into discrete steps for campers to follow. If breaking the task into steps is not sufficient to support engagement, the teacher candidates might also create token systems (see Figure 7). These experiences support teacher candidates in using different strategies to enhance learner engagement in various learning environments.

### **Social Interactions**

Finally, one goal of camp is to support campers in making connections with peers who have common interests. Prior to the start of camp, UA faculty briefly describe ways teacher candidates can facilitate these connections. They recommend that teacher candidates look for opportunities to prompt interaction between campers by getting to know their interests, planning games and activities, and recognizing natural opportunities for campers to interact during tasks. When teacher candidates do not recognize these opportunities on their own, UA faculty might model or provide a verbal prompt. For instance, the UA faculty might suggest that a teacher candidate encourage a camper to share their art creation with another camper who is interested in a similar topic. This creates a natural opportunity for two campers with common interests to connect while also providing a clear occasion for the teacher candidate to practice. Through these experiences, teacher candidates learn to provide low levels of support and foster relationship development between youth.

### **Outcomes for Children, Youth, and Teacher Candidates**

Summer camp experiences create space for children and youth to participate in different activities, experi-

ence diverse community settings, and connect with others their age. However, the unstructured environment coupled with a short duration of time can lead to unwanted outcomes for campers and facilitators. This partnership enhances teacher candidate readiness for their future roles of creating inclusive spaces in which all learners belong. Further, the collaboration improves inclusive experiences for children and youth with diverse support needs and assists those in the community tasked with planning and delivering summer camp experiences. Without partnerships such as the one described, children and youth with support needs would likely have more limited access to the experiences offered to their peers. Thus, this camp meets a critical need in teacher preparation by leveraging innovative field experiences to enhance teacher candidate skill development while simultaneously improving community inclusion by fostering inclusive community-based experiences for all children and youth.

### **DR. WRIGHT'S REFLECTION ON ARTS INTEGRATION AND COLLABORATION**

*Dr. Wright reflected on what she learned from the ways Drs. Wilkinson, Bubash, and Speight had leveraged the arts for their teacher candidates. She learned how museum-based field experiences provided an innovative community rooted in collaboration through summer camp programming at Crystal Bridges. It was clear Dr. Speight's training of Crystal Bridges camp staff had strengthened inclusive camp experiences across museum summer programming for children and youth. She recognized the unique opportunity for teacher candidate skill development created by their co-delivery of an inclusive camp.*

*Dr. Wright also considered the benefits provided by Dr. Bubash in*

*collaboration with Dr. Barry. Their use of visual imagery provided teacher candidates with fresh ways to explore their learning, attitudes, and experiences.*

*Visual expression was a powerful way for Dr. Bubash's teacher candidates to develop and examine their emerging teaching philosophies and underlying assumptions about their efficacy and expectations for their future students.*

*Dr. Wilkinson's approach to collaborating with local actors through simulations of challenging interactions with fictional families also created opportunities for teacher candidates to reflect deeply on their assumptions of students and families. Role playing through challenging scenarios provided teacher candidates with opportunities to practice preparing for important engagement with families. Such opportunities in field experiences were insufficient for the types of application that Dr. Wright knew her own candidates longed for and would benefit from.*

*With three new ways to leverage arts integration into her work with teacher candidates, Dr. Wright was excited to explore opportunities within her own teacher education program. She felt re-energized to explore art-based partners in her community and consider ways to work with them to develop field-based and in-class experiences for her teacher candidates. She considered the possibility of engaging the local children's theater program, wondering if the leaders of the theater would consider creating simulation experiences for her candidates. She remembered an art educator in residence at the local museum whom she had met previously and wondered if he might be interested in sharing his approach to the creative narrative expression of high schoolers with her teacher candidates. Dr. Wright was full of ideas she knew would better meet the expressed needs of teacher candidates in her program.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Colleen Wilkinson, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at Daemen University, teaching instructional design, classroom management, and inclusive methods courses. Dr. Wilkinson worked in public schools as a special education teacher for over ten years before moving into higher education. Her research interests include classroom management, student teacher supervision, and universal design.

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# Amplifying Voices: Preparing Teachers with Self-Advocates' Stories and Strategies for Inclusion

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## ABSTRACT

One critical responsibility of special education faculty lies in effectively preparing preservice teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This article provides teacher educators with practical strategies for using contact-based interventions as a tool for informing preservice teachers about the unique challenges and strengths of students with disabilities. Faculty members from two different universities employed similar teaching strategies that integrated personal stories from self-advocates with autism into their introductory course curriculum. By collaborating with self-advocates and incorporating their personal perspectives within the courses, the professors created a bridge between theory and practice, ensuring that future educators are equipped to support diverse learners. These narratives can enhance preservice teachers' understanding while amplifying the voices of individuals with disabilities, thereby promoting empathy and informed practice. This article highlights the professors' shared commitment to working with self-advocates and illustrates how others can leverage self-advocacy as a pedagogical tool to enrich their teacher candidates' experience. Self-advocates themselves contributed to the article, demonstrating how authentic voices and lived experience can positively impact course design as well as preservice teachers' perspectives about disability.

## KEYWORDS

**Collaboration, contact-based interventions, empathy, preservice teachers, self-advocacy, students with disabilities, teacher education**

**A**ccording to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately one in six children in the United States has been diagnosed with a developmental disability (Maenner et al., 2023). With a national trend toward more inclusive placements for students with disabilities, these students' presence in general education classrooms is steadily increasing (Williamson et al., 2020). Approximately 67% of students with disabilities now spend 80% or more of their school day in general education classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Yet, despite this shift, many educators enter the workforce with limited understanding of disability and may hold misconceptions about how to effectively support students with varying disabilities (Barned et al., 2011).

Traditional teacher education programs have been rooted in general education philosophies and traditional special education practices, which may leave little room for hands-on experience or coursework that addresses inclusive practices. To help equip future educators with tools they will need to support students with disabilities in inclusive environments, teacher education programs must adjust. Because the decisions that educators make regarding students with disabilities significantly influence their access to general education curriculum and environments (Ruppar et al., 2017), it is important for teacher education programs to include practical, inclusive teaching strategies that are grounded in respect, equity, and the lived experiences of people with disabilities.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION KNOWLEDGE IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Over the past 50 years, schools have evolved from exclusive spaces to today's settings where general education teachers are required to meet the needs of diverse populations, including students with disabilities. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) students with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The LRE principle ensures that, whenever appropriate, students with disabilities are educated alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible to meet their individual needs. Commonly referred to as inclusion, this approach involves supporting students with varying abilities within the general education classroom. In order to effectively prepare all teachers, both general and special education, to meet the expectations of the law and effectively serve students with disabilities along with their non-disabled peers, teacher education programs are evolving to include special education content and coursework for all preservice teachers. Because an introductory course on special education is sometimes the only disability-related course that general education preservice educators take, exposure to authentic lived experience is a powerful way to increase the impact of such limited coursework (Clausen et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2012). Special education teacher educators must embrace this responsibility as they are typically the people who teach disability-related content to most, if not all, teacher candidates at their institutions.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2024), 7.5 million students—15% of all students within public school settings—aged 3 to 21 were served under the IDEA in the 2022-23 school year. Of school-aged students receiving services, 95% were enrolled in regular schools, 2% were enrolled in separate schools for students with disabilities, 2% were partially placed in regular schools, and a combined 1% were educated in other environments (i.e., homebound, hospital, separate residential facility, correctional facility; NCES, 2024). Furthermore, 67% of these students spent 80% or more of their time in general education classrooms (NCES, 2024), highlighting the need for general education teachers to have knowledge of inclusive practices that address the needs of students with disabilities. However, studies suggest that general education teachers are not always aware of the unique needs of students with disabilities or how to create classroom spaces where everyone can achieve success (Bruggink et al., 2016; Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Leko et al., 2015; Smit & Humpert, 2012).

Effectively preparing general and special education teachers for inclusive classrooms remains an ongoing challenge and a topic of debate among teacher educators (McHatton & Parker, 2013; Shade & Stewart, 2001). Teacher education programs aim to show teachers how to create inclusive learning environments where all students have the chance to succeed. Nevertheless, many of these training programs often fall short when it comes to giving general education teachers the specific tools, strategies, and confidence they need to success-

fully work with students who have disabilities (Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Ingvarson et al., 2014; Rock et al., 2016). As a result, many teachers feel unprepared to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities in their general education classrooms.

## A FRAMEWORK TO AMPLIFY DISABLED VOICES IN TEACHER EDUCATION

A framework can help educators clarify why certain practices are being introduced or used so that practical ideas are not just activities, but a meaningful approach to learning. Disability Studies in Education (DSE) is a framework that provides teacher candidates with a critical approach for rethinking traditional special education practices and policies (Freedman, 2016). Grounded in an asset-based perspective, DSE emphasizes the social model of disability and challenges deficit- and medically-oriented approaches.

While conventional special education models often dominate teacher education programs, integrating DSE into these programs can better prepare future educators to create inclusive and accessible classrooms (Ashby, 2012; Broderick & Lalvani, 2017). It is essential for teacher candidates to not only understand disability through a DSE perspective but also explore how disability can be meaningfully embedded in the curriculum to reduce barriers for students with disabilities (Collins & Ferri, 2016). By adopting inclusive instructional strategies and embracing a holistic view of diversity, teacher candidates can position themselves as advocates for equity and agents of change in their educational communities (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019).

<sup>1</sup> Although person-first language (e.g., person with a disability) is often preferred in professional and academic writing, the authors feel that practitioners should recognize that preferences within the disability community vary. This article intentionally uses a combination of person-first and identity-first language (e.g., disabled person) to reflect the voices of self-advocates and to respect individual and community choices. Some individuals embrace identity-first language as a source of pride and political identity, while others prefer person-first language to emphasize personhood over diagnosis. Although practitioners are encouraged to use person-first language when writing for publication, the choice to use both forms reflects a commitment to honoring varied perspectives and to promoting respectful, inclusive discourse.

**TABLE 1:** Suggested Course Materials Centering Disabled Voices

Category	Title	Author/Creator(s)	Year
Book	Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist	Judith Heumann	2020
Documentary	Crip Camp	James Lebrecht and Nicole Newnham	2020
Documentary	Deaf President Now	Nyle DiMarco and Davis Guggenheim	2025
Book	Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally	Emily Ladau	2021
Book	Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century	Alice Wong	2020
Documentary	Forget Me Not	Olivier Bernier	2021
Book	Owning It: Our Disabled Childhoods in Our Own Words	Jen Campbell, James and Lucy Catchpole	2025
Book	Sipping Dom Pérignon Through a Straw: Reimagining Success as a Disabled Achiever	Eddie Ndopu	2023
Book	Sitting Pretty: The View from My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body	Rebekah Taussig	2020
Book	The Future is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes, and Mourning Songs	Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha	2022
Documentary	The Ride Ahead: Love, Tattoos, and Other Disabled Things	Samuel and Dan Habib	2024
Book	We're Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation	Eric Garcia	2021

*Note.* This is a sample of materials that could be used in an introductory course on disability-related topics. All listed items center disabled voices and lived experience, as they were created by individuals with disabilities or their families.

### Collaborating with the Disability Community in Teacher Education

One way that DSE challenges traditional special education practices is by making the voices and lived experiences of disabled people<sup>1</sup> a central part of teacher education. By hearing directly from the disability community, teacher candidates can reframe disability as an identity that is shaped by social, cultural, and political forces. Individuals with disabilities can name and challenge assumptions about normalcy, independence, and notions of intelligence. When teacher candidates engage with narratives from the disability community, they have opportunities to critically examine their own biases and consider how ableist practices may limit participation and belonging in general education classrooms. In addition, the inclusion of perspectives from disabled individuals challenges the traditional hierarchy of higher education, in which non-disabled professionals' voices are

the only ones heard in discussions about disability (Bialka et al., 2024). Moreover, when teacher educators establish the importance of positive disability dialogue, it reinforces and models ways that teacher candidates can do the same in their future classrooms. Research has shown that leaving disability out of classroom conversations can negatively impact the educational experiences and identity development of students with disabilities (Mueller, 2021; Orr & Goodman, 2010).

While traditional teacher education programs often rely on conventional special education models and textbooks, these materials may not provide the full picture of disability. For instance, they often frame disability as something that needs to be fixed and leave out disabled individuals' perspectives and positions (Brantlinger, 2006). To move toward more inclusive and authentic teaching, teacher educators should first find ways to engage with content created by disabled people themselves. Social

media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Substack have become rich spaces where disabled activists share knowledge, community practices, and advocacy efforts. These platforms offer accessible entry points for discovering creators whose work centers disability justice and education equity. Engaging with such content can help teacher educators diversify course materials and introduce students to content that supports inclusive pedagogies and models the importance of valuing disabled voices in education. Additionally, to meaningfully incorporate disability perspectives into courses, faculty should intentionally select texts that reflect positive and diverse disability experiences. These might include memoirs, documentaries, podcasts, or other works created by people with disabilities. Such sources can offer authentic insights that challenge a deficit-based model of disability and foster critical reflection among preservice teachers. Table 1 offers a list of recommended materials to help teacher

educators get started.

While texts and media can be effective in facilitating learning within teacher education programs, we advocate going beyond traditional teaching methods by focusing specifically on the power of lived experiences. Our experience highlights what can happen when teacher educators partner with the local disability community and create opportunities in their courses for people with disabilities to share their stories directly with future educators. This article represents collaboration on different levels. It is the result of the collaborative efforts of two faculty members within teacher education programs from different institutions who each collaborate with self-advocates from the autism community. We highlight how using contact-based interventions with disabled partners can bring essential insights to conversations with preservice teachers and embed self-efficacy and collaboration into teacher education programming. By combining professional knowledge with the real-life experiences of people with disabilities, this article outlines how contact-based interventions can advance the impact of teacher education programs and provides suggestions for potential adaptations by other institutions.

## CONTACT-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Traditionally, contact-based interventions have been used in the medical field as a means of reducing stigma surrounding mental health (Gurung et al., 2023). Described as “brief contact with a stranger that is quite different from naturally occurring contact, often combined with an educational component,” contact-based interventions have been identified as the most effective approach for reducing stigma and discrimination (Jorm, 2020). For the purposes of this article, contact-based interventions are defined as *differentiated learning*

*experiences that combine classroom learning with presentations by individuals with personal stories related to class objectives.* Direct contact with disabled people is intended to reduce stigmatized perceptions teacher candidates may hold about disability.

Recent literature emphasizes that preservice teachers’ attitudes toward educating students with diverse needs in inclusive classrooms are influenced by a variety of factors, such as their personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, individual beliefs, and the inclusive teaching approaches presented during their teacher education programs (Beacham & Rouse, 2012; Forlin et al., 2009; Ismaïlos et al., 2022; Tiwari, 2024). Because experiences within teacher education programs impact the successful inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms, all such programs must adapt to more effectively prepare preservice teachers with the knowledge, strategies, and confidence required to support the diverse needs of all learners. As demonstrated by Rosenbaum et al. (1986), high quality, direct contact with disabled people can be effective in decreasing stigma. Integrating contact-based interventions that feature personal stories of disability and self-advocacy is one way teacher education programs can offer students meaningful and direct interactions with individuals who have disabilities.

### Contact-Based Interventions Across Two University Programs

The authors of this article came together to discuss how contact-based interventions are currently being used in introductory special education courses. At The Ohio State University, this is the only course on disability that preservice general education majors take. The majority of preservice teachers who enroll are in their third or fourth year of programming, with some enrolled in stu-

dent teaching placements concurrently with this class. At Buffalo State University, preservice teachers are usually in their first or second year of programming, hailing from varying education majors and age/grade levels (e.g., secondary English education, social studies education, music education, career and technical education, elementary education, early childhood education). This is one of the few courses where preservice teachers will learn about disability. Since these preservice teachers will assume many different teaching roles upon graduation, we often reinforce the shared responsibility for providing differentiated instruction and supporting disabled students in general education settings.

Across both universities, the introductory course addresses student learning objectives pertaining to the history of inclusion, accessibility laws, and differentiated learning practices for students classified as having a disability under IDEA. Both instructors are faculty with backgrounds in special education and implement similar teaching strategies to leverage applicable assignments that shape perceptions of disability. They both integrate personal stories from self-advocates with disabilities, including texts by disabled authors, to reinforce inclusive pedagogies. Specific to this article, the faculty highlights first-hand accounts from two collaborative partners from the disability community: Kaylie Clinton and John Mitchell Uli-barri, often called “Mitch.”

### Meet the Self-Advocates: Kaylie and Mitch

Kaylie is a 21-year-old graduate of Williamsville South High School, located just outside Buffalo, New York. She is an avid learner with a wide range of interests, including reading, writing, musical theater, and cheering on her favorite football team, the Buffalo Bills. Kaylie’s passion for advocacy and

education has led her to engage with preservice teachers by sharing her lived experience as a person with a disability. Her journey as a communicator began in her teenage years, when she was invited to respond to a book written by fellow spellers—individuals who use spelling to communicate. Since that time, her writing and public speaking have continued to evolve. Most recently, Kaylie presented at the TASH National Convention, where she spoke to professionals, families, and individuals with disabilities, answering questions and offering insight. Her work reflects a commitment to fostering understanding and inclusion in educational spaces. Dr. McCabe and Kaylie initially connected through an email inquiry from Kaylie that had been printed and displayed above the copier at the university. The email expressed a desire to be a guest speaker in education classes, so Dr. McCabe reached out to her for a collaboration.

Mitchell is an author and advocate whose work centers on sharing his experiences as an individual on the autism spectrum. He has written three books (soon to be four) about his childhood, offering insight into life on the spectrum from a deeply personal perspective. In addition to his published work, Mitch hosts a blog and podcast titled *Rules for a Greatastic Life*, where he reflects on his adult experiences and continues to build understanding and connection. He currently works at New Story Schools, the same institution he attended following his diagnosis, bringing his journey full circle. Beyond storytelling, Mitchell is passionate about building friendships—a meaningful pursuit shaped by the limited social connections he experienced growing up. Dr. Fast and Mitchell initially connected when he was a high school student working in her son’s classroom. After Mitch graduated, Dr. Fast reached out to ask if he would share his personal experiences with inclusion

and exclusion as part of her university coursework. This connection has since grown into an effective partnership that offers preservice teachers meaningful collaboration.

### **Why Contact-Based Intervention?**

Ed Roberts, a leading figure of the international disability rights movement, emphasizes that “when others speak for you, you lose” (Charlton, 1998). When aligned with content that prioritizes knowledge from those with lived disability experience, contact-based interventions can help ensure voices from the disability community are recognized and heard within preservice teacher training. By implementing such interventions, teacher educators can offer teacher candidates a critical, asset-based framework that challenges them to resist deficit-driven special education models (Ashby, 2012; Broderick & Lalvani, 2017).

Contact-based interventions introduce personal stories from individuals with disabilities into learning, often offering powerful insights that can reshape how we prepare future educators. Rather than relying solely on textbooks or traditional methods, hearing directly from people with lived experience brings a human-centered perspective that is often missing in teacher training. For example, Kaylie shared that speaking with university students helps her feel seen “as a person first, rather than a label,” and Mitch reflected on how becoming an advocate allowed him to be the kind of support he once needed as a student. These reflections remind us that educational systems have historically overlooked or marginalized disabled voices and that meaningful change begins by listening. This article centers those voices, offering practical ways to bring lived experience into the classroom and strengthen inclusive practices in teacher

education programs.

Integrating the voices and personal narratives of individuals with disabilities into teacher education courses enriches learning and promotes inclusive educational practices. Faculty aiming to foster inclusive learning environments should intentionally invite disabled people to share their perspectives on relevant course topics. Both Mitchell and Kaylie tell personal stories about navigating both inclusive and exclusionary educational settings. These authentic stories not only humanize course content but can deepen student understanding and empathy.

### **Integrating Contact-Based Intervention into Teacher Education Coursework**

Across both universities, contact-based interventions have been used to successfully promote similar goals and emphasize that teachers have the ability to impact and serve all students, including those with disabilities. In addition to knowledge-based instruction and theory of education, coursework is designed to offer students with examples of lessons, strategies for differentiation, and experiences that lead to real-world applications of inclusive practices in everyday environments, both in the classroom and beyond. In addition to these experiences, both instructors also involve stories from experts with lived experience of disability. In this way, self-advocacy is leveraged as a pedagogical tool and a powerful strategy for promoting inclusion, empathy, and understanding of the needs of disabled students. These interventions and partnerships have proven to be effective and can be adapted for use in other teacher education programs. In the following section, we offer suggested steps for teacher educators to effectively incorporate contact-based interventions into their courses.

### **Step One: Remind Teacher Candidates that Education is a Journey**

Many preservice teachers begin their careers with limited classroom experience, which can feel overwhelming at first. As such, it is important to remind them that teaching is a journey—one that starts with curiosity, openness, and a willingness to grow. Just like the excitement of setting out on a new trip, the early stages of teacher education should be filled with energy and a positive mindset. Research suggests that a teacher's belief in their ability to work with students with disabilities predicts their attitude and willingness to engage in inclusive settings, with stronger senses of personal efficacy linked to more positive attitudes (Brownell & Pajares, 1999; Lifshitz et al., 2004; Lopes et al., 2004; McHatton & Parker, 2013). One way to strengthen this sense of efficacy in preservice educators is by exposing them to the lived experiences of people with disabilities. Encourage your content experts to share their own journeys as a way to inspire new teachers, as Kaylie and Mitch do in the following stories.

**Kaylie's Words:** *My educational journey was a "long and winding road" (thanks, Dad, for my love of oldies!) I started at a school for Autistics. At that time, I couldn't really communicate, so I think the teachers assumed I was developmentally disabled. They used ABA [Applied Behavior Analysis], which was more training than teaching. I didn't learn much, but to be honest, the repetition was a comfortable way to get through the day. The food rewards weren't too bad either!*

*Beginning in sixth grade, I went to a public school, where I was in a self-contained class. I had also begun to learn to type, which caused an explosion of learning, or rather, my ability to demonstrate*

*my learning. I had been absorbing my whole life, but now I could "wring out" what I knew! Because of this, I began to be mainstreamed into academic classes the following year.*

*Mainstreaming rocked! I learned so much, and I loved the challenge. One advantage in middle school was that my aide support was consistent, and I was comfortable with her. That made a huge difference. In high school, I often felt like a burden—or an afterthought. I was assigned to support staff who were not trained to work with me; some were even afraid of me. That lack of that consistency affected my success in high school, something I am still upset about, years after graduation.*

*Don't get me wrong—I learned a ton in high school! But without consistent support from someone trained to work with me, I couldn't communicate my learning, or when I was confused or overwhelmed. That led to outbursts, which, frankly, scared teachers and peers, and further alienated me. High school was, many times, a very lonely period of time. But I persevered and earned a Regents Diploma, something I am very proud of!*

**Mitch's Words:** *My educational experiences vary based on the grade I was in and the school I was attending. Elementary school was not good for me due to the lack of support that was necessary for me, since I was undiagnosed. Middle school was a better experience for me because, now that I was diagnosed with autism, I had better support in the new school. However, during those years, I was struggling with internalized self-doubt because instead of simply being quirky, I had to learn how to live*

*with a disability. My years in high school were the most successful of all my years of schooling because of the internship program offered. It gave me the freedom to learn in the way I needed, and it also gradually helped me become more confident as an autistic person.*

### **Step Two: Model Success Through Stories**

When teaching in inclusive settings, many teachers report uncertainty, negative attitudes, and a lack of competence and confidence regarding the integration of disabled students (de Boer et al., 2011; McHatton & Parker, 2013). Similarly, research by Shade and Stewart (2001) indicates that teachers may feel simultaneously hopeful about the goals of inclusion and overwhelmed by the challenges it presents. It is common for both new and experienced teachers to question their ability to effectively support diverse learners. These doubts are understandable, but they also highlight the need for practical, relatable examples in teacher education. As a teacher educator, you can ask self-advocates to highlight things that teachers have done to support their learning as well as actions that have created barriers for them in the classroom. When Kaylie and Mitch share first-hand accounts with preservice teachers, they provide contextual examples that can support teacher candidates' confidence levels and generate ideas for future inclusive teaching strategies.

**Kaylie's Words:** *I think teachers have a lot of power to make school successful. Special education teachers should communicate constantly with general education teachers. They need to be their students' greatest advocate, and need to work with general education teachers, support staff, and administration to coordinate the students' programs and sup-*

*port services. General education teachers should not hesitate to ask for help when needed and should include individuals with disabilities as much as possible. When this was done for me, school was fun, I was held to high expectations and was successful!*

*School was less successful when mainstreaming wasn't well planned. General education teachers shouldn't be "surprised" by a mainstreamed placement, or left to fend for themselves after the student arrives. Most importantly—train the support staff! It is extremely unfair to them, the general education teacher, and the student, as well as their non-disabled peers, to go into a situation completely unprepared. Setting up students for success is time consuming and political, but so very necessary!*

**Mitch's Words:** *Before I was diagnosed, my peers didn't know what was "wrong with" me. At that time, I had a crush on my best friend Sam. When my teachers noticed our connection and gave her the responsibility of being my peer buddy, this made my time in elementary school better.*

*There were also times when teachers made my life more challenging. I was diagnosed before Autism had become a pop culture thing (early on it felt like it was just Rain Man and me who had it). So, before I was diagnosed, my classmates thought I was just a little weird for no reason; in my first year of middle school, before I transferred to a different school, it felt like the teachers were reinforcing, and even actively participating, in that belief.*

Kaylie's and Mitch's insights are an example of how lived experiences, both positive and negative, are essential in

shaping inclusive and effective teacher education. During her presentations, Kaylie emphasizes the critical role teachers play in student success, noting that when special and general education teachers collaborate, communicate, and advocate together, students thrive. She shares that her most positive school experiences came when she was included, held to high expectations, and supported by a well-prepared team, including a support staff who understood her needs. In contrast, poorly planned mainstreaming efforts left her feeling unsupported and set up for failure. Mitch's reflections echo this need for intentionality. Before his autism diagnosis, he often felt misunderstood by both peers and teachers. However, when educators recognized his strengths and created opportunities for connection, specifically through the use of a peer buddy, his school experience improved. Both voices highlight that inclusive education is not just about placement; it is about preparation, empathy, and educators' willingness to see and support the whole student.

### **Step Three: Amplifying Lived Experience in Teacher Education**

Incorporating self-advocates into teacher education models the importance of amplifying student voice in inclusive education. When individuals with disabilities share real-world examples, they highlight the importance of differentiation and individualized support and reinforce the need to create classroom environments that are responsive to all learners. In addition, these partnerships can allow preservice teachers to share their thoughts and questions in a space that is welcoming and inclusive.

Actively involving preservice teachers in the process of contact-based interventions can make them more meaningful experiences. You might prepare students ahead of time by using differentiated learning techniques, such as free-writes,

jigsaws, or turn-and-talk activities, to help them generate thoughtful questions and ideas. These strategies not only encourage reflection but also ensure that teacher candidates are ready to engage in meaningful dialogue with guest speakers.

For online or virtual visits, instructors can invite preservice teachers to submit questions in advance and share them with the presenter. This helps create a more personalized and purposeful experience for everyone involved. Whether in person or online, these interactive approaches help preservice teachers connect theory to practice, model inclusive teaching strategies, and recognize the value of lived experience in shaping their understanding of disability and inclusion. In these stories, Kaylie and Mitch share what it is like to have this voice and to interact with preservice teachers in the university classroom.

**Kaylie's Words:** *I love the advocacy work I'm doing at the university level! First off, it allows me to spend time with non-disabled peers, which is so much fun! I really like the idea that I can teach them—being the "helper" rather than the "helped" is a wonderful reversal of roles. I think it also allows college students, especially those going into education or other "helping professions," such as occupational therapy, physical therapy or speech/language pathology, to meet an individual with a disability in a more casual way.*

*I encourage the students to ask questions, and they don't disappoint! I feel like answering questions teaches the students to see me as a person first, rather than a label or diagnosis. Answering questions is my favorite part of presenting—questions range from personal, like how I met my boyfriend, to very thoughtful, like how it feels to be unseen and unheard. Answering these questions allows me to be com-*

**FIGURE 1:** Responses from Teacher Candidates

<p><b>Challenging Assumptions:</b> Hearing directly from self-advocates helped teacher candidates confront and rethink their assumptions about disability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We cannot underestimate the ability of students with disabilities, especially those that are highly capable of the same things that students without disabilities are.”</li> <li>• “This is a little hard for me to admit but speaking and interacting with Kaylie made me a little more aware of my unintentional bias or maybe misunderstanding about her disability. I enjoyed her sense of humor and really appreciated her vulnerability. It was so eye-opening.”</li> <li>• “Something that really stood out to me in your presentation is the importance of teaching children boundaries in friendships and all relationships. I think this is something that some adults may assume to be common sense but is an extremely important lesson for all students to learn and practice.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Value of Lived Experience:</b> Teacher candidates found the personal and honest sharing by the presenters to be powerful and eye-opening, offering insight into the lived experience of disability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Hearing about your journey allowed us to see the world through your eyes, which sparked meaningful discussions and reflections among my classmates and I.”</li> <li>• “I’ve never interacted with family members or friends who are on the autism spectrum, so hearing about your struggles with classmates, teachers, and even self-confidence was striking. And I say that because I’ve learned everyone on the autism spectrum has different experiences and stories to tell, so hearing yours is eye-opening.”</li> <li>• “I know that the saying goes, ‘If you meet one kid with autism, then you’ve only met one kid with autism,’ but it’s a lot harder in practice to not resort to generalization to an issue. Kaylie showed me other aspects of the experiences of autism that I had not considered before.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>High Expectations and Support:</b> Teacher candidates empathized with the need to hold high expectations while providing supports for students with disabilities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Some key insights I learned today were to always hold your students up to a high standard to be met. Kaylie emphasized the fact that if she wasn’t held to a higher standard and wasn’t given the opportunity, she would not have gotten to where she was today.”</li> <li>• “Be aware of students’ disabilities in order to support their needs but never use the disorder as a crutch or a reason to doubt the student’s true abilities.”</li> <li>• “Hearing a self-advocate with complex communication needs has deepened my understanding of inclusion. It emphasized the importance of respecting diverse communication styles and providing tailored support.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Relevance and Lasting Impact on Practice:</b> The presentations were viewed as highly relevant to teacher preparation and inspired candidates to apply inclusive practices in their future classrooms and commit to continue learning from the disability community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Hearing Kaylie’s presentation gave a better and more direct insight into life with her disability which leads to a greater understanding of how to approach students in similar situations.”</li> <li>• “I loved how she said that every student has something to offer and that it is the teacher’s job to help find that. I think that brought to light why I want to go into this career path.”</li> <li>• “Mitchell, thank you for coming into our classroom and sharing your story with all of us. I really enjoyed hearing your journey growing up, and how differing circumstances affected not only your performance in school, but your emotional well-being. Touching on both of these subjects really put into perspective and reinforced the idea of how much of an impact a teacher (as well as school members) has on their students’ lives long-term.”</li> </ul>

pletely honest with them and shows the students how much we are alike.

**Mitch’s Words:** *It’s a little surreal. When I was in high school, I wished that there had been advocates helping my teachers out in my early education,*

*and now I’ve hopefully become what young Mitchell wanted for another kid.*

Kaylie’s and Mitch’s reflections powerfully illustrate why amplifying the voices of individuals with disabilities is essential in teacher education. Kaylie

shared how meaningful it is to engage with university students as a peer and teacher—flipping the traditional dynamic of being the one helped to being the one who helps. Her favorite moments come from answering students’

questions, which allow her to be seen as a whole person, not just a diagnosis. Mitch echoed this importance, reflecting on how his role as an advocate now fulfills a need he once had as a student to help his teachers understand him better.

### **THE IMPACT OF CONTACT-BASED LEARNING: YES! IT WORKS.**

Existing literature, including findings on the effects of training, suggest that contact-based interventions are an effective way to decrease stigma and increase knowledge of disability among preservice educators (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015). In exploring whether contact-based interventions were effective in our university classrooms, we used two different strategies to assess preservice teachers' knowledge and perspectives. First, preservice teachers completed surveys before and after a classroom visit in which a guest speaker shared personal stories, offered feedback, and answered questions, creating a space for authentic dialogue. While the survey tool had some limitations as far as alignment with the course goals, the results still revealed meaningful changes in student thinking. Key takeaways include:

- **Understanding individual differences:** Before the visit, some preservice teachers believed children with autism were very similar to one another. After hearing the speaker's story, nearly all recognized the diversity within the autism community, showing increased awareness of individual differences.
- **Support for inclusion:** Preservice teachers already believed in inclusive education, but after the presentation, more expressed strong confidence in integrating autistic students into general

education settings. Their views became more nuanced, reflecting deeper consideration of what inclusion truly means.

- **Clarifying misconceptions:** A significant number of preservice teachers initially were not sure whether children with autism could "outgrow" it. After the intervention, nearly all correctly understood that autism is a life-long condition, and uncertainty dropped to zero.
- **Value of peer relationships:** Preservice teachers increasingly affirmed the importance of encouraging interactions between students with autism and their typically developing peers, recognizing these relationships as key to successful inclusion.
- **Role of general education teachers:** While most preservice teachers disagreed with the idea that only special education teachers can support autistic students, the post-survey showed a broader range of opinions. This shift suggests that preservice teachers began to see the role of general educators as part of a larger support system.
- **Confidence in teaching:** After the presentation, more preservice teachers strongly agreed that general education teachers can make a meaningful difference for students with autism. This reflects growing confidence in their own ability to support diverse learners.

Secondly, we collected exit tickets from preservice teachers after Kaylie and Mitch presented at each university. Our students found the presentations highly valuable, informative, and engaging. Responses written by preservice teachers indicated that hearing from self-advocates challenged

their own assumptions about disabilities. Many appreciated the speaker's honest and personal sharing of life and school experiences, which provided an impactful and eye-opening perspective on lived experience of disability. Preservice teachers reflected on the importance of holding high expectations and providing support for their future students. Kaylie's and Mitch's presentations were praised for being direct, thoughtful, and rich with practical strategies and insights applicable to general education settings. Notably, preservice teachers wrote about how learning from self-advocates will impact their future practice and indicated their willingness to continue learning from the disability community to incorporate more inclusive teaching practices in their future classrooms. Figure 1 provides a sample of responses from teacher candidates.

Overall, the inclusion of Autistic guest speakers helped preservice teachers move beyond textbook knowledge. It gave them a chance to hear directly from individuals with lived experience, reinforcing the importance of listening, empathy, and inclusive practices. For faculty looking to enrich their courses, inviting self-advocates into the classroom can be a powerful way to connect theory with real-world understanding.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Preparing effective educators begins long before they enter their own classrooms, making the quality of preservice teacher education a critical factor in long-term success. Kaylie and Mitch have proven to be an invaluable source and wealth of information for our preservice educators. In exploring the implications of contact-based interventions, outcomes span two key areas: first, providing higher education professionals with strategies to more effectively design, structure, and deliver

“For faculty looking to enrich their courses, inviting self-advocates into the classroom can be a powerful way to connect theory with real-world understanding.”

disability-related content in teacher education programs; and second, offering practical insights and resources directly applicable to preservice teachers as they navigate their training.

Hearing stories from individuals with disabilities who once navigated the education system themselves is a valuable experience, not only for preservice educators but also for faculty who work in teacher education programs. The firsthand accounts of people with lived experience offer insights that traditional training materials often miss. While faculty may be experts in pedagogy, policy, or research, contact-based interventions bring a human dimension that deepens preservice teachers' understanding and challenges their assumptions. Ultimately, when teacher educators also engage with these voices, they are better equipped to prepare future teachers who are not only knowledgeable but also compassionate and inclusive in their teaching. Kaylie shared, “*I think college professors need to put aside textbooks in favor of real, immersive learning. There needs to be a balance between book learning and practical experiences. Having individuals with disabilities in the classroom provides this exposure in a more comfortable way.*”

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CLOSING THOUGHTS

Positive and negative narratives of lived disability experience in educational settings can challenge assumptions about disability, encourage reflection on ableism in traditional special education practices, and promote strategies to improve educational experiences and outcomes. When designing coursework to inform preservice educators about the importance of recognizing and serving students with disabilities in classroom settings, teacher educators can collaborate with disabled individuals as an effective way to humanize disability and encourage critical thinking about equity across educational settings. This type of feedback goes beyond textbooks and theory, providing future teachers with authentic advice.

As we reflect back on the information shared throughout this article and look ahead to new practices that can be used in teacher education, Kaylie's and Mitch's voices remind us why collaboration is so important. Their stories offer an essential perspective, not only for preservice teachers but also for faculty involved in teacher education. By creating space for these voices, we move closer to building classrooms that are truly inclusive, empathetic, and responsive. In the words of Kaylie, “*Individuals with disabilities are individuals first, and disabilities second. It takes time and effort, but it is essential for teachers to get to know their students.*” And, in Mitch's words, “*You, as authority figures in school, have the ability to shape a special needs child's life, whether they are in your class or in a coworker's class.*” Use of contact-based interventions and continued research into the benefits of this strategy will contribute meaningfully to teacher education strategies for promoting inclusion through collaboration.

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Danene Fast is an Associate Professor at The Ohio State University, where she leads the Programs in Visual Impairments, including Ohio's only Orientation & Mobility (O&M) program. With over 20 years of direct experience serving students with visual impairments prior to her time at the university, Danene's research centers on accessibility and inclusion for students with disabilities. In her current role, she prepares future educators and rehabilitation professionals to expand services in high-need areas, reflecting a lifelong commitment to advocacy and education.

### Katie M. McCabe, Ph.D.

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### Kaylie Clinton

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John Mitchell Ulibarri is an author, self-advocate, and podcast host whose work explores life on the autism spectrum. He shares personal insights through books, blogging, and his podcast *Rules for a Greatastic Life*. Mitch currently works as a Teacher Support for students with autism at New Story Schools in Columbus, Ohio, the same school he attended after his initial autism diagnosis.

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# Strengthening Special Educator Preparation through Global Partnerships

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## ABSTRACT

Global partnerships offer a unique opportunity to strengthen special educator preparation by transforming perspectives of teacher candidates and building skilled teacher scholars who are knowledgeable global citizens. This article spotlights two models of international collaboration designed to enhance special education teacher preparation: (a) faculty-led short-term study abroad and (b) global student teaching. Both models foster the development of skills critical to special educators' success, including flexibility, leadership, intercultural competencies, as well as high-leverage practice use. Stakeholder efforts, benefits, and potential barriers in implementing international collaboration within special education teacher preparation are highlighted. By drawing attention to challenges and insights from teacher candidates, faculty, and staff, we aim to provide practical and replicable strategies for teacher educators seeking to internationalize aspects of their special education teacher preparation programs.

## KEYWORDS

**Collaboration, Ghana, global partnerships, international experience, study abroad, Zambia**

**G**lobal partnerships in special education teacher preparation programs offer a unique opportunity to transform perspectives and practice for pre-service teachers and higher education faculty. Collaborations across borders enable an enriched understanding of many high-leverage practices (HLPs) in special education, including and especially the utilization of culturally inclusive pedagogies and practices (Council for Exceptional Children, 2025; Smolcic & Katunich, 2017). For example, cultural immersion experiences have the potential to enhance special education teacher candidates' ability to design flexible learning experiences informed by students' culture, fostering the ability to design more inclusive, accessible curricula (de Hei et al., 2020). Furthermore, placement opportunities in multilingual environments may encourage special educators to better utilize translanguaging strategies that blend languages to support engagement and expression, thereby cultivating skills for building accessible environments that value inclusive communication (Cioè-Peña, 2022). Such qualities are important aspects of preparing high-quality special education teachers, as evidenced by Council for Exceptional Children's HLPs 7 and 13, which focus on establishing responsive learning environments and adapting curriculum tasks and materials. Equally important for developing strong special educators are the HLPs focused on high-quality collaboration. Skills required by teacher candidates for collaborating across novel systems and cultures may be developed and practiced abroad, strengthening capacity for genuine, culturally responsive collaboration with professionals and families.

In addition to strengthening teaching practice, international collaborations involving special education teachers can help inform and broaden participants' *perspectives* about education as a global priority as affirmed by the United

Nations' (2015) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) – an urgent and collective call to action consisting of 17 sustainable development goals which identify critical priorities for advancing global peace and prosperity. Specifically, SDG 4, *Quality Education*, aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2015, The 17 Goals section). Teacher preparation programs that facilitate international learning opportunities can help globalize future educators' perspectives and experiences, advancing more just and equitable societies across the globe through the power of quality education. Such partnerships reveal beliefs, practices, and systems that are universal as well as those that differ based on one's location on the globe.

Global collaborations in special education teacher preparation programs should offer reciprocal value for home-site and international program partners. Home-site and international faculty may benefit from exposure to innovative teaching perspectives and strategies, which can later be integrated into course content and can inform international professional development opportunities (Khan et al., 2019). Moreover, international connections may foster global research collaborations thereby increasing quality, cross-cultural perspective, and international visibility of research and dissemination of evidence-based practices (Collins et al., 2017). These partnerships are strongest when they are mutually beneficial and provide *windows* and *mirrors* through which participants can better understand education across global contexts.

Brandon et al. (2022) previously emphasized the importance of international collaborations for special education teacher candidates in supporting global literacy and

culturally responsive practice. The authors described three examples of collaborations across borders related to special education teacher preparation: (a) an online course offering in special education from Australia with a student-initiated option for graduate students in the collaborating program to visit, give guest lectures, and/or observe K-12 schooling in Australia; (b) a series of four virtual professional development sessions delivered by U.S. faculty to build special education teacher capacity in Belize; and (c) a cross-border visit by Southern California teacher candidates to assist with teacher trainings in Tijuana, Mexico. While each of the three examples highlighted the myriad benefits of international collaborations in special education, none of the examples documented sustained, reciprocal partnerships that included cultural immersion experiences designed to strengthen future special education teacher perspectives and practices. In this article, we extend the work of Brandon et al. (2022) by spotlighting two models of sustained, in-person international collaboration designed to enhance special education teacher preparation and practice: (a) faculty-led short-term study abroad and (b) global student teaching. Although originating from different institutions, these collaborative models share features that distinguish them from examples presented in extant research: sustained programming over time, faculty-led partnerships, scaffolded preparatory and follow-up experiences, and the advancement of special education knowledge and practice. These features enable special education program faculty to crystallize HLP knowledge and skills for future special education teachers through well-designed cultural immersion experiences and embedded, consistent program elements

before and after experiences abroad.

### **Model 1: Faculty-led Short-term Study Abroad**

#### ***Example 1: International Professional Development Schools, Buffalo State***

Buffalo State's International Professional Development Schools (IPDS) Consortium is a model that offers teacher candidates short-term, education-focused study-away trips of approximately 3 weeks during summer and winter sessions. With programs in 10 countries across four continents, IPDS aims to prepare world-smart teachers and spotlights issues of equity, intercultural competency, inclusion, and multilingualism to help teachers meet the complexities of today's dynamic and diverse classrooms (Hill et al., 2018).

**Program Design.** Teacher candidates who participate in IPDS enroll in a credit-bearing pre-travel course to build understanding of education policy and practice from a global perspective and deepen their cultural curiosity. Once in a host country, participants embed in partnering local schools and universities where they observe and practice teaching. While each partnership is built upon faculty members' expertise and aligns with the host country context, Table 1 summarizes key elements of initiating and sustaining global partnerships to advance teacher preparation through ongoing collaboration. Common elements across all IPDS programs include pre-travel activities (e.g., relationship building, goal setting, recruitment), preparing for and implementing successful in-country educational and cultural experiences, and post-travel activities such as reflection, dissemination, and program evolution.

**Critical Partnerships.** Collaboration is the keystone of successful global education programs. The IPDS Zambia program is led by faculty members with expertise in special education and main-

**TABLE 1:** Sample Elements for Sustaining Global Partnerships in Educator Preparation

Phase	Element	Goals	Examples
Pre-Travel	Partnership building	Identify potential partners, establish trust, set collaborative goals, identify school sites, establish program parameters	Leveraging personal and professional connections; email discussions; series of virtual meetings
Pre-Travel	Recruitment & application	Attract a pool of engaging and high-quality applicants; review & select candidates	Fliers; tabling in student union; information sessions with presentation and Q&A
Pre-Travel	Credit-bearing prep course	Team building; cultural, logistical, and academic preparations	Course readings & assignments; discussions; global education office
In-Country	School placements	Observation; practice teaching; cultural immersion	Classroom visits; mentor teacher demonstrations; lesson delivery
In-Country	Higher ed partnerships	Knowledge sharing; expand professional network	Joint campus events; professional development sessions, social gatherings
In-Country	Cultural opportunities	Learn and immerse in host country	National parks; museums; arts & entertainment activities
Post-Travel	Reflection & dissemination	Process lessons learned; extend and share insights with professional network	Student & faculty conference presentations; on-campus panel presentations
Post-Travel	Partnership maintenance & program growth	Sustain and deepen relationships; program revisions and evolution; research & practice	Joint faculty research projects; periodic virtual meetings; continuation of prof. dev. initiatives

tains a focus on both general and special education practice in schools around the capital region of Lusaka. It is anchored by a partnership with the University of Zambia's (UNZA) School of Education and with partner elementary and secondary schools. Year-round conversations between Buffalo State University and UNZA faculty drive decisions about how to structure the program to maximize impact for all stakeholders. The goal of the IPDS Zambia program is to build participants' understanding of inclusive practices, disability advocacy, and special education policy from a global perspective. Before arrival in Zambia, IPDS participants research and learn about the educational context, history, and culture of Zambia through

a credit-bearing pre-travel course. Upon arrival in Lusaka, UNZA faculty augment teacher candidates' knowledge of these topics through research presentations, tours, and campus-based activities, allowing participants to appreciate cross-cultural differences and similarities in how both countries support students with disabilities. In the process, teacher candidates from both Buffalo State University and UNZA interact and build professional relationships and friendships through campus collaborations.

UNZA's Special Needs Educational Resource Center, a campus-based school serving students with complex support needs, is a host school where participants observe local special education practices; it also serves as a hub for local

professional development activities. In their pre-travel course, IPDS candidates learn about HLPs and other pedagogical practices prioritized in Zambian general and special education settings. To facilitate knowledge sharing among partners, UNZA faculty solicit input from local special education teachers about desirable professional development topics. In response, Buffalo State University faculty lead workshops; a recent one of which involved 38 Zambian special education teachers and focused on picture-based communication systems, task analysis, and visual schedules. IPDS students prepared communication boards and other teaching materials for use in the workshop and collected an array of educational materials to be donated to partner

schools. Virtual workshops coordinated by UNZA and Buffalo State University faculty allow for this work to be ongoing and enable expertise from both countries to be leveraged to meet the needs and interests of Zambian special education teachers. With this structure, IPDS students are afforded many opportunities to help disseminate essential pedagogy, a hallmark of HLP 1, “Collaborate with professionals to increase student success,” and a vital component of improving outcomes for students with disabilities across the globe.

During visits to other local public schools, IPDS students gain information about local pedagogies and educational approaches by attaching to a mentor teacher, where it is common for 60 or more students to be taught in a single classroom. The pedagogical practices implemented by the Zambian teachers in these classrooms are a primary focus for student observations and written reflections, and Zambian teachers’ expertise in delivering multilingual instruction to very large classes is quickly revealed. For IPDS participants, overwhelmingly monolingual, this can provide an opportunity to shift their view of multilingualism from obstacle to strength. Even though HLPs are not explicitly taught in Zambian teacher preparation programs, many HLPs for students with disabilities are regularly incorporated into Zambian teachers’ instructional repertoires, as they must de facto establish consistent, organized, and responsive learning environments (HLP 7) and incorporate active student engagement (HLP 18). IPDS students are eventually afforded the opportunity to practice teaching under their mentor’s guidance. Throughout the program experience, participants and faculty analyze similarities and differences in pedagogy, curricula, educational resources, etc., revealing the complexity of our global quest to lift all students. These diverse field experiences shine a

light on how countries that share similar educational policy goals for high-quality education for all students may approach the goal differently because of (a) available financial or material resources, (b) historic cultural attitudes towards, and understandings of, disability, and (c) educator or systems-wide capacity.

**Reciprocal Site Visits.** Although not always feasible, whenever possible, short-term study abroad programs can strive to enact reciprocal site visits, enabling the program leaders to serve both as hosts and guests. UNZA faculty members visiting Buffalo State on a recent exchange participated in a similar slate of school-based, campus-based, and cultural excursions as is typical in the IPDS program in Zambia. At a Buffalo State conference, for example, Zambian faculty presented on educational history across the African continent and shared the successes and challenges of strengthening special education practice across Zambia. The reciprocal trips also help leaders forge strong personal and institutional connections, facilitate shared research endeavors, and have the potential to equip program leaders with a greater understanding of the partner context and thus, of their own context—a concept central to the philosophy of *Umunthu* (e.g., *Ubuntu*), that asserts that we exist as individuals through our interconnectedness with others, an African concept with particular relevance to this work (Mugumbate et al., 2024). Mbiti (1990) explained *Ubuntu* philosophy as “What happens to the individual happens to the whole group. The people and country are intricately related. The individual can only say: ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am’” (p. 106).

Affirming Mbiti’s (1990) perspective, the reciprocal visits between UNZA and Buffalo State University have facilitated meaningful knowledge transfer and resource sharing among professionals

and institutions, including topics such as evidence-based approaches to autism assessment and intervention, classroom management, inclusive pedagogical strategies, and picture-based communication strategies. The partnership has facilitated the exchange of practical resources, including sensory manipulatives, educational planning tools, and specialized communication aids for students with disabilities. As a result of this collaboration, Buffalo State faculty presented at Zambia’s first Autism Conference, which helped build local professionals’ skills in supporting students with autism spectrum disorder across both clinical and school environments. This institutional partnership has not only strengthened academic ties but has also created platforms for mutual professional development in inclusive and special education to be sustained by the program stakeholders.

### ***Example 2: Faculty-Led Special Education Teacher Preparation Experience in the Global South, The College of New Jersey***

To effectively develop culturally responsive teachers, pre-service experiences must introduce innovative approaches that deepen understanding of disciplinary knowledge and teaching practices (Sharma, 2020). In response to this need, Faculty-Led Special Education Teacher Preparation Experience in the Global South was designed and implemented. This program invites special education teacher candidates at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) to participate in a 3-week intensive faculty-guided learning journey to the West African nation of Ghana. The objective is to provide an intensive field experience that will assist the teacher candidates in moving beyond conventional notions of identity, multiculturalism, and static conceptions of “ways of knowing” that are shaped by their dominant cultur-

al perspectives. Through this faculty-led, 3-week program, teacher candidates can deliver and study specialized instruction for students with complex disabilities in Ghana.

According to the World Health Organization, between 7% and 10% of Ghana's population has a disability. In Ghana—as in many countries in the Global South—individuals with disabilities often experience poverty, marginalization, and limited access to education, public health services, and other essential support systems. Despite government policies promoting inclusive education, many children with complex disabilities, such as autism, remain excluded from formal schooling (Ghana Education Service, 2007).

**Program Design.** TCNJ teacher candidates earn course credit for participating in this faculty-led international special education training experience. The experience aims to cultivate a heightened awareness and deeper understanding of cultural diversity and its impact on the lives of children with disabilities. Through a balanced schedule of lectures, demonstrations, and classroom-based experiences abroad, students develop knowledge and skills in current, high-leverage, and research-supported practices addressing the needs of individuals with low-incidence disabilities (e.g., autism, intellectual disabilities). Throughout the course and the associated field experience working with children, candidates examine effective strategies in assessment, curriculum design, instructional methods, positive behavioral supports, and home-school collaboration.

**Critical Partnerships.** In collaboration with Haven International (Non-Governmental Organization) and the recognition of Ghana Education Service (Ministry of Education), teacher candidates develop knowledge and skills in the education of students with

significant disabilities within a cross-cultural context and become infused with the culture of this West African country. As with the IPDS programs, during a 3-week winter or summer term, a cohort of eight to 10 undergraduate and graduate students accompanies faculty to Ghana to participate in this intensive, culturally immersive learning experience. Teacher candidates receive instruction in evidence-based practices designed to meet the needs of students with complex disabilities within the Ghanaian cultural context. The course combines lectures with an intensive classroom-based practicum and field experience in which candidates work directly with children and youth within the country at Haven International's Learning Resource Center.

Haven International's Learning Resource Center hosts approximately 20-25 students ages 2 to 26 years with complex disabilities. Teacher candidates are placed within classrooms to work alongside the teachers and staff of this school. The teacher candidates attend daily morning briefing sessions to chart the day's objectives and plans. The daily, collaborative debriefing sessions are designed to reflect on the ongoing development of new cultural paradigms and to deconstruct the powerful cultural influences on the development and education of children with disabilities within Ghana. Upon arrival at the school site, students are deployed to specific classrooms to first observe and then provide instruction using their assigned teachers' plans. After a few days, the teacher candidates are given the opportunity to develop and implement their own instructional experiences. Each candidate is also provided with two profiles of students within their assigned classroom and is responsible for assessing and generating an impressions and recommendations report for their assigned students, key practices related

to HLP 6 (Use assessment data...). Haven International provides guidance and support to ensure participating candidates are provided with a comprehensive and rich cultural experience. In addition, teacher candidates have the opportunity to provide trainings, with the accompanying faculty, to Ghanaian teachers, parents, and/or family members.

**Augmenting Cultural Learning Opportunities.** It is essential to recognize that the experience of teaching in and collaborating with a West African school serving students with disabilities, while invaluable, is insufficient on its own to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of the region's complex cultural landscape. Accordingly, the teacher candidates engage in a curated series of cultural experiences designed to deepen their contextual knowledge. These experiences emphasize Ghana's historical role in the transatlantic slave trade, the Pan-African movement, and the nation's rich artistic and musical traditions. Organized day trips beyond the metropolitan areas of Accra, led by experienced Ghanaian cultural guides, provide further opportunities for immersion. Through these structured excursions, candidates develop a nuanced understanding of Ghana's diverse cultural heritage, the enduring legacies of colonialism, and the continuing significance of religion and traditional worldviews.

One measure of the impact of the faculty-led, short-term study abroad collaborative model is revealed through the number of student participants who continue to pursue additional global programming. Across both institutions' examples described above, many participants participate in multiple such experiences, while some go on to pursue longer stints abroad, such as completing their student teaching in another country. Still others seek positions as teachers abroad after graduating. Taken together, these trajectories reveal how short-term

global educational experiences and partnerships can serve as a catalyst for participants' continued engagement in global education.

## **Model 2: International Student Teaching**

### ***Example: Global Student Teaching Program, TCNJ***

Collaboration with international partners can extend beyond short-term study away programs and involve school partnerships that have longer-term overseas field experiences, as well. The Global Student Teaching (GST) program at TCNJ was established in 1982 in response to an increased emphasis on internationalizing teacher preparation. While many educator preparation programs developed similar initiatives at the time, most have since been discontinued due to increasingly stringent state regulations and certification requirements (Embry-Jenlink et al., 2020). This trend persists despite ongoing research that highlights the significant benefits of international experiences in enhancing teacher candidates' cultural and global competencies (Akpovo et al., 2020; King et al., 2022).

**Program Design.** The GST program allows teacher candidates to complete the first half of their full-time student teaching semester abroad and then return to complete the remainder domestically. The partnership sites include a range of international schools across 12 countries on four continents, all of which use English as the language of instruction with curricula that closely reflect typical U.S. classrooms. This opportunity is available to all teacher candidates at TCNJ. Roughly 10%-15% of the college's education majors enroll in the program, and of those participants, 35%-50% are special education majors.

To prepare for the GST opportunity, candidates work with an assigned supervisor prior to departure to learn

about the expectations. Once abroad, candidates, who are placed in small cohorts of two to four per site, submit weekly lesson plans and reflections, meet with the supervisor virtually, and are observed via video, and eventually, in person.

**Critical Partnerships.** The partner schools abroad tend to have excellent resources, robust professional development initiatives, and diverse student populations. They also focus heavily on social-emotional development, global citizenship, and diversity. International schools can vary widely in their approaches and resources, but these partner schools have been selected to ensure they reflect the inclusive pedagogical practices and values of the college. While 20 years ago, most international schools offered little support for students with learning differences, that has shifted dramatically in the past 10 years, often spurred by schools' commitment to inclusion, diversity, and a whole child approach (Agustian, 2021; Underwood et al., 2025). Maintaining strong partnerships with the schools requires intentional effort and allocation of resources.

The GST program relies heavily on partner schools to not only provide the professional experience necessary to prepare teacher candidates for their own classrooms, but also to support them while they are abroad. At each site, a school administrator arranges placements and serves as the main contact and support person while the candidates are abroad. Mentor teachers and site coordinators help candidates find housing, locate English-speaking doctors if necessary, and address other issues as they arise. In appreciation for this role, mentors and coordinators receive an honorarium from the college.

To maintain the integrity of the program and meet state regulations, TCNJ education faculty supervisors visit

each school about halfway through the placement. They spend several days at the school, not only observing the teacher candidates but also developing an understanding of the school context and maintaining strong relationships with the administrators and teachers. While these trips are costly for the college, they are crucial for an international program (Major, 2020). Several partner schools will not accept student teachers from other universities because the supervisors do not visit the school, develop relationships, and understand the school community.

These faculty visits prove essential to developing mutually beneficial relationships with partner schools. They provide an opportunity to gather feedback on the program and how the college can better prepare candidates, in general, and specifically for GST. It is also a chance to ensure that the mentor teachers are benefiting from hosting the student teachers, as mentoring a teacher candidate can be a powerful professional development opportunity, challenging teachers to define, express, and reflect upon their practice (Amorim & Ribeiro-Silva, 2024). These visits have resulted in several opportunities for further collaboration between the faculty and partner schools; for example, after visiting a school several times for observations, a partner school invited a home-site faculty member to lead a year-long professional development initiative. The professor held sessions at the school in August and then led a follow up session several months later while also visiting to observe teacher candidates. Other examples include college faculty and teachers working across borders on action research projects and publications.

**Impact on Perspectives and HLP.** *“Global student teaching strengthened my ability to adapt constantly - not*

**TABLE 2:** Sample Activities for Maximizing Effects of Global Experiences in Special Education

Before	During	After
Infuse opportunities to learn and practice culturally responsive pedagogy in early special education field experiences at home site	Incorporate reflective summary journals to document full experience (e.g., via blogs, video journals, podcasts); include prompts linked to high-leverage special education teaching practices	Assign reflective journals with prompts crafted to highlight knowledge and perspectives gained about special education policy, practice, and advocacy in the host country
Identify activities where UDL and translanguaging may be practiced in tandem during inclusive lesson planning coursework (i.e., TrUDL; Cioè-Peña, 2022)	Ensure special education faculty are available to mentor during the experience and special education faculty are partners in the host country	Schedule post-trip meetings to facilitate guided seminar discussions with home-site faculty and others who traveled
Prep meetings/courses with special education faculty before departure to: a) build knowledge of destination country, culture, and education system, b) acquire and practice intercultural competencies and intercultural humility, and c) strengthen collaborative skill set amongst the team of travelers	Ask questions to bolster reflective teaching practice (e.g., what went well, what did not go well, what can you do differently next time, what high-leverage resources can you integrate?) and address intercultural considerations (e.g., identify a cultural difference and what you did to address it)	Identify or create opportunities to share insights from the experience with members of the local community (e.g., classmates, faculty, fellow professionals) through panel discussions, conference presentations, or poster sessions
Integrate opportunities to learn about differences in special education policy and practice across the globe; should be infused early in the preparation program	Develop observation protocols for students to use that help them focus on high-leverage practices for inclusive classrooms; consider pairing this with a formal study exploring special education practice in the host country	Encourage student membership in global special education organizations (e.g., International Academy for Research in Learning Disabilities, Division of International Special Education & Services)

*only to new languages, but also to different educational norms, classroom dynamics, and cultural perspectives. My experience allowed me the opportunity to grow as both an educator and a student in that I navigated working with diverse learners through culturally responsive and empathic teaching practices.”* -Michelle Bombace, M.A.T. Special Education, Fall 2024 Global Student Teacher, TCNJ

Heddy (2022) documented the impact of GST in a recent study of past participants, highlighting a range of personal and professional benefits, including enhanced cultural competence, greater instructional adaptability, and a stronger commitment to inclusive practices. The data revealed that participating in GST significantly enhanced teachers’ ability to engage in several HLPs. Specifically, participants reported significantly stronger family engagement practices,

a deeper understanding of students’ backgrounds, and increased cultural responsiveness, leading to more inclusive and adaptive instruction (HLPs 3, 4, & 13). Moreover, every respondent believed GST strengthened their ability to establish positive home-school relationships, with one noting, “learning how to... build a relationship with families and students based on an appreciation of their background and their culture definitely played into the way I view diversity now as something that’s exciting” (Heddy, 2022, pg. 68). Another key impact reported by participants was using students’ interests, strengths, and experiences in their instruction, key facets of HLP 4. Many reported greater empathy, particularly with multilingual learners, and a commitment to equity-focused practices. Several noted that GST inspired long-term professional goals, including obtaining ESL cer-

tification and teaching in high-needs settings (Heddy, 2022).

## DISCUSSION

### Common Themes Across Models

For teachers of students with disabilities, global opportunities are all the more essential as their roles in schools position them to advance inclusive learning by (a) enacting pedagogical practices that meet the needs of *all* learners in their classrooms, (b) assuming leadership roles that expand the instructional and assessment capacity of their colleagues, and (c) and advancing inclusive systems at the school and district level. The examples above acknowledge the importance of reciprocity in sustained collaborations with international partners. Each is also carefully crafted to deepen teachers’ perspectives of the field and teaching skill sets necessary for success. Below,

we discuss recommendations for situating global experiences within special education preparation programs and discuss potential challenges in sustaining such partnerships.

### ***Preparing for and Reflecting on Special Education Teaching Experiences Abroad***

Global partnerships and teaching experiences should not occur in isolation from the special education teacher preparation program. In addition to the work of the faculty members who are direct collaborators with partner schools, strong implementation of either model described above requires efforts on the part of the entire program faculty; curriculum, experiences, and activities should be carefully developed and embedded into the program to support teacher candidates before and following global experiences. While Table 1 identified core elements of sustained global partnerships in teacher preparation, Table 2 offers examples of experiences that may be helpful for maximizing the impact of global experiences within special education teacher preparation programs. In each of the examples presented above, these activities are neither isolated from the program itself nor do they occur haphazardly; rather, they are strategically situated within each program before, during, and after global experiences.

### ***Possible Challenges and Facilitative Strategies***

Despite the shared benefits of international partnerships, challenges may inhibit or prevent implementation. Brandon et al. (2022) previously classified challenges of international partnerships in special education programs into four major categories: (a) provision of service, (b) language, (c) technology, and (d) contextual barriers and offered possible solutions to each of these barriers. We agree with this analysis and identify

three additional barrier categories based on the short-term and GST models outlined herein. These additional potential barriers include: (e) financing, (f) state requirements for certification, and (g) evaluative rubrics.

Financing to support participation in global education can indeed pose a challenge for teacher candidates and can be a barrier to broader participation in such opportunities. Facilitative strategies include enabling students to carry costs on their student accounts when the program involves coursework during the academic year. Other strategies include external group fundraising by cohorts prior to travel and institutional support from departments, deans, and global affairs offices. Virtual exchanges can also be developed to promote international collaboration (e.g., <https://www.stevensinitiative.org/> and <https://coil.suny.edu/about-suny-coil/>) in ways that do not require travel but result in international communication and collaboration among universities and schools. In our experiences, these approaches have proven effective at decreasing overall student costs and increasing access to global education for a wider array of students.

State requirements for certification for special education teachers can pose another barrier for GST, specifically, as state requirements often dictate that mentor teachers for special education student teachers hold a special education certification or master's degree. This credential is not always present or equivalent across global contexts. As a workaround, student teachers can complete their special education placement in their local community and complete the general education component within the context of a global classroom during the other half of the semester. Alternatively, short-term cultural immersion experiences before student teaching, like those described in Model 1, offer the opportu-

nity to enhance perspectives and practice without impacting special education teaching certification requirements.

A final barrier we identify is the potential misuse of rubrics used in U.S. classrooms for evaluating student teaching performance in global settings. Teacher candidate evaluation rubrics developed and validated to evaluate teaching proficiency in Western schools may not be a reliable or valid fit for use in another context. To circumvent this barrier, we advocate for field supervision evaluations to be conducted by or in collaboration with faculty members with an understanding of the host country and its education system (i.e., a program leader/coordinator) who can apply their nuanced perspectives to arrive at reasonable evaluation scores using the standard rubric that take into account the novel classroom context and the expectations for teaching in those spaces. We affirm that barriers such as those mentioned above will always be present for any endeavor; however, we encourage institutions to embrace the overwhelming value in global educational experiences and, therefore, remain undeterred by such barriers and pursue facilitative strategies and workarounds to expand these opportunities for future special education teachers.

### ***Cultural Variables Related to Educating Students with Disabilities***

Legal/policy variations relating to students with disabilities and educational access and rights across borders must be anticipated (Jordan & Ramaswamy, 2014). Similarly, differences in implementation of special education services exist across global contexts, and thus, "evidence-based practices" are not universally recognized, validated, and practiced across the globe: practices and values are always influenced by local contexts (Collins et al., 2017). Cultural differences that have been observed in

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the education of students with disabilities during global education programs involve differences in disability awareness. In some cases, these lead to participants noting stigma or discrimination towards individuals in the communities they visit, while in other global programs, participants may note relative advances in inclusive or special education practice as compared with their own local educational system. Context is paramount in observing and interpreting the nature of disability awareness and special education policy and practice in each community. As a result of the near-constant possibility of encountering cultural mismatches whilst abroad (e.g., a transgression in one country may be a common practice in another), a priority for program leaders is to foster cultural curiosity and humility while also relying on collaboration with the international partners to gain insight into and prepare for these mismatches. Developing this skill set is indeed an ongoing process, and one not well conveyed through a few lessons delivered prior to international travel. Effective program leaders consistently model cultural curiosity and humility, build students' knowledge in this area, and weave related activities and discussions throughout the program, as suggested in Table 2. In so doing, they will best position students for success in developing a set of invaluable intercultural skills, which they will leverage throughout their careers as special educators in every conceivable educational

setting.

Although directing a global colleague to a trusted website featuring effective teaching practices from one's own country is one way to share knowledge, it is also limited by the potential for cultural misalignment. On-site training allows stakeholders to better mediate cultural differences and adapt practices to fit local contexts. In the professional knowledge exchange that typifies many global partnerships, partners must prioritize intercultural competencies to navigate cultural differences, expand practices that research shows to be effective in reaching students with disabilities, and thus advance the United Nations' SDG 4, a high-quality education for all. Thus, the cultural variables related to teaching students with disabilities can perhaps best be seen as an opportunity to better inform educators' understanding of what works best, for whom, when, and where. In becoming familiar with other countries' vision, resources, and strategies for delivering a high-quality education to students with disabilities, our collective capacity to reach all learners grows, both as individual professionals and as a field.

## CONCLUSION

Today's classrooms are increasingly dynamic and diverse, requiring teachers to be culturally responsive practitioners who view differences as an asset to be explored and used to positive effect. As a result, it is essential for teacher

preparation programs to incorporate authentic methods that help future educators internalize their training and develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to work effectively with students from diverse backgrounds. It is not possible to achieve this unless there is purposeful and mutually beneficial collaboration with international partners. The literature on teacher education recognizes study abroad and experiences outside the dominant culture as core pedagogical strategies and best practices for preparing K-12 teachers for diverse classrooms (Sharma, 2020). When thoughtfully and collaboratively designed, implemented, and integrated into the program, these opportunities can have a profound impact on instructors, teacher candidates, and their global partners.

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