

## Let's Have Lunch: Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Support Students with Disabilities via Authentic Social Interactions

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Educational leaders have called for the development of authentic experiences to better develop pre-service teachers' competencies in the classroom, particularly with regard to working with students with disabilities. This research was conducted to study the impact of a unique experience of lunchtime social interaction between preservice teachers and students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities in the transition age program at a local high school. The authors describe the experience and its influence on pre-service teachers' competencies and beliefs. A qualitative analysis of reflection samples revealed pre-service teachers' competencies in identifying the strengths and needs of students, as well as accommodations and instructional strategies to support them. Results suggest that the experience was effective in enhancing pre-service teachers' positive beliefs and alleviating their fears about working with students with developmental disabilities. The study promotes the value of such inclusionary experiences on teacher education to prepare them for successfully including students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The day before, I was a little nervous because I did not know how these students were going to behave with us. Now I know they are full of love and happiness ...Not every student learns the same, some are more advanced than others. SWD are very capable of doing a lot of things. I thought that these students were not capable of reading and knowing their colors so well. I was wrong. (Participant 19)

There has been a tremendous increase in research in education of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities leading to very successful outcomes in and outside the classroom. Such students are increasingly included in the general education classrooms for a large portion of the school day, especially in lower grades (National Center on Educational Statistics, 2015). Students with disabilities (SWD) between ages 16-21 benefit from transition-age programs focusing on life and social skills (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2017). Despite the benefits of social interaction with peers without disabilities, the lack of students without disabilities in the transition age within the high school inhibits opportunities for social interactions among the two groups. While there are calls for rethinking teacher preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, 2014), the teacher education curriculum continues to rely largely on the traditional form of field experience and student teaching placements for providing authentic experiences to prepare pre-service teachers (PST).

### Review of Literature

Teachers' competencies and beliefs are integral components to enhancing outcomes for SWD in an inclusion classroom. When teachers have positive perceptions of their relationships with SWD, reports of

students' problematic behaviors decrease, and students are more socially included with peers (Syriopoulou-Delli, Cassimos, Tripsianis, & Polychronopoulou, 2012). Along with pedagogical content knowledge, teacher beliefs and motivation are critical in promoting the success of students (Kunter, Klusmann & Baumert, 2013) and in particular SWD (e.g., Ross-Hill, 2009; Swain, Nordness, & Leader-Janssen, 2012); however, the lack of adequate knowledge and skills to teach children with disabilities is certainly another essential factor that prevents teachers from providing effective education (Cameron & Cook, 2007). Teachers may hold negative beliefs about working with SWD, perhaps related to fears about whether they have the skills to effectively support them (Friend & Bursuck, 2009). They may not be receptive because they do not know how to teach or how to differentiate for children with disabilities (Lopes, Monteiro & Sil, 2004). While teacher beliefs may provide the necessary foundation for inclusive support, developing the teaching competencies and skills necessary for supporting SWD in inclusive classrooms should be part of the preparation for all PST. Because teacher beliefs are inextricably related to their perceived competence, measures of teacher competencies include beliefs and motivation along with pedagogical content knowledge and skills (Pit-en Cate, Markova, Krischler, & Krolak-Schwerdt, 2018). Competencies include the ability to identify accommodations in the classroom (Fisher, Frey & Thousand, 2003) and the ability to view students as unique individuals with their own specific strengths and needs (Hammond & Zimmerman, 2012).

Research studies generally report modest positive outcomes related to PST's self-efficacy, competencies, and perceptions about SWD as a result of field experiences (Atiles, Jones, & Kim, 2012). However, some researchers (Swain et al., 2012) suggest that field

experience coupled with coursework may lead PST to improve their attitudes towards disabilities and teaching in an inclusion classroom. They recommend that early field experiences enabling interactions with SWD be coupled with coursework in special education.

While what constitutes “field experience” varies within and across institutions, one intent is to develop skills in instruction and give practical application to concepts encountered in coursework. One of the gaps in teacher preparation research on field experiences is the study of the nature and impact of innovative field experiences on PST’ progress in learning to teach (Wilson, Floden & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). This report on teacher education research also calls for future research to develop measures of teachers’ developing professional competencies rather than focus on their attitudes or how they feel about the experiences. Despite this call for research almost 20 years ago, we noted the dearth of published research in measuring teacher competencies as a result of such field experiences. Zeichner (2010) highlights this in the calls for third space options for using teaching practice as sites for inquiry and a paradigm shift in the role of field experiences. The need to elevate skills in teaching students with intellectual disabilities is essential, with specific regard to instructional planning and identifying strategies to support learning (Cameron & Cook, 2007).

Having knowledge about laws and policy and improving levels of confidence using coursework and simulation activities do not necessarily address concerns or perceived stress in PST (Forlin & Chambers, 2010), suggesting the need for developing alternative ways for PST to interact with SWD. Several studies have documented increases in pre-service teacher attitudes (Swain et al., 2012) and self-efficacy (Atiles et al., 2012), but additional research is needed to examine whether non-traditional field experiences have a positive impact on PST’s competencies with regard to supporting SWD.

Direct contact with SWD, including contact coupled with coursework, is shown to lead to positive attitudinal shifts among PST (e.g., Rilotta & Nettlebeck, 2007; Sharma, Forlin & Loreman, 2008). Although it is likely that field experiences provide at least some opportunities for informal interaction, researchers have not specifically examined the impact of social interactions with students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities on PST. In an effort to improve the competencies and positive beliefs of PST with regard to using inclusion practices, an experiential learning component was included in an introductory course on special education required of all education majors during the foundations segment of the teacher education program. The experience involved lunch meetings with SWD from a local high school transition program.

The purpose of this study was to explore the following research questions: Will interactions with SWD in a social setting (1) reveal preservice teachers’ ability to identify strengths & needs of SWD? (2) reveal preservice teachers’ ability to identify accommodations and differentiation strategies for SWD? and (3) bring a positive change in their beliefs regarding including SWD?

### Theoretical Framework

Pre-service teachers need to perceive SWD as individuals with unique strengths and challenges. The ability to identify strengths and needs in SWD is a significant skill for all inclusion teachers, enabling them to capitalize on strengths and use them to plan instruction. The construct of teacher competencies is used as part of the framework for this study, defined for this study as the ability to (1) identify unique strengths and needs in the individual and (2) identify accommodations and/or differentiation strategies. Knowledge and use of these competencies are addressed by InTASC teacher preparation standard #2 (InTASC, 2013).

Considering the influence of beliefs and attitudes on teachers’ perceptions, judgments and classroom behaviors (Pajares, 1992), the construct of teacher beliefs was used as an additional theoretical frame in this study. The term beliefs is commonly used synonymously with terms such as attitudes, dispositions, knowledge and perspectives (Pajares, 1992). The role of beliefs in effective teacher preparation has been well established (e.g., Ross-Hill, 2009). PST’s acquisition of the professional knowledge necessary for becoming an effective teacher may be inhibited by failure to study these teacher beliefs (Morton, Williams & Brindley, 2006). In this research, teacher beliefs include PST’s assumptions about SWD, as well as their judgments about their own skills and dispositions with regard to working with SWD.

The coupling of teacher competencies and teacher beliefs in our theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of addressing both competencies and beliefs regarding inclusion at the pre-service level (Pit-en Cate et al., 2018) and for providing authentic social experiences for PST to interact with SWD (Kunter, et al, 2013). In this study, a course with an embedded field experience provides knowledge and supporting skills for shaping beliefs toward inclusion. The focused and well-structured interactions with SWD, paired with coursework in diverse characteristics and inclusion strategies, provided opportunities for the PST to experience meaningful application of knowledge and skills. It also provided them with a chance to examine their own perspectives and beliefs on inclusion in understanding diversity among their students.

## Method

### Participants

Pre-service teachers enrolled in the introductory special education course over two semesters served as participants in the study. The total number of participants across all education majors (elementary, secondary, special education, music, and visual arts) was 35. The demographics of the PST are provided in Table 1. All PST participated in an embedded field experience with SWD from a high school transition program of a local school district. The students from the local high school were between 18-21 years of age and were identified as having either intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. They ranged in ability levels from mild to moderate.

### Procedures

**The Let's Have Lunch Experience.** A teacher from a local high school transition program had contacted our College for possible partnership opportunities with our teacher candidates. The introductory class to special education seemed like a good fit for this opportunity, considering that all education majors were required to take this course and such an embedded experience would be valuable for all PST. The primary author/faculty member teaching this course and the school teacher decided to make these lunchtime social interaction experiences for the PST and the SWD.

The field experience was embedded as a mandatory component to a semester-long introductory course in special education taken by all education majors. The learning outcomes targeted in this course are provided in Figure 1. An important objective was to teach PST to view SWD as individuals with strengths as well as needs.

Six regularly scheduled class sessions were set up as meeting times with SWD, each lasting an hour. The meetings began after the course was in session for 4 - 5 weeks, so that the PST had a basic knowledge of Universal Design for Learning (Rose & Gravel, 2010; U. S. Department of Education, 2015), categories of disabilities and characteristics, accessibility and differentiation. To prepare the PST, the instructor provided instruction and scaffolding during class sessions on what appropriate social behaviors could be modeled, such as being mindful of how they greet their peers, how they greet their professors, how they speak to each other and the choice of topic, words, etc.

The course instructor arranged the meetings and sought a brief description from the teacher on each of the students arriving each week (who varied due to the nature of the transition program). Most PST had little or no experience teaching and few had previous interactions with SWD, as revealed by a brief survey.

To ensure successful interactions during the experiential component, PST were carefully paired so at least one had some prior experience with disability or indicated comfort with people who had diverse abilities. For example, if a student had severe communication challenges, he/she was paired with at least one special education major or someone with previous experience with similar students.

The meetings were structured around lunch, with opportunities to walk around campus or play card games as time permitted. During the interactions, the instructor modeled certain behaviors for the PST such as greeting the SWD and asking them if they wanted to know anything about their "new friend" from college, asking them to remember their friend's names and what their favorite things are, and reminding them gently of table manners ("Oops, excuse you!", "Did you forget the magic word?", "How can you ask for help?"). These scaffolds were provided as necessary during the interactions, especially during the first two meetings and with SWD who were known to be particularly in need of more supports in these areas. As the meetings with SWD progressed, these supports were faded out, and the instructor simply remained on the scene for support or direction as needed. PST completed a brief, prompt-guided reflection following each of the six interactions (See Figure 2).

### Data Sources

In order to assess change in beliefs over time, data from the first and sixth reflections by each of the 35 PST, a total number of 70 reflections, were analyzed for this study. The course assignment was designed both to facilitate reflection and to evaluate the PST's competencies and beliefs as a result of the lunch experience with SWD. PST were asked to interact with, and observe, SWD and note what they could do well in their language, social, and academic skills, followed by what they needed to learn in these areas. They were also asked to reflect on the experience: what went well or not, what they learned that will prepare them for supporting SWD, what accommodations they would put in place if they had similar students in their classrooms, and if their perceptions of working with SWD had changed as a result of the interaction. The reflection prompts were explained to them in class before their first meeting with SWD, and models were provided to clarify the expectations for each prompt.

### Data Analysis Process

Using a qualitative approach, we analyzed pre-service candidates' reflections from their initial and final lunch meetings with SWD using a directed content

Table 1  
*Participant Demographics (Pre-service teachers)*

Major	Number of participants(n)	Percent of sample (%)
Elementary Education	21	60.0
Special Education	10	28.6
Visual Arts Education	2	5.7
Music Education	1	2.9
Secondary Education	1	2.9
Total	35	

Figure 1  
*Learning outcomes in the course:*

1. Identify the 13 disability areas as defined in Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA 2004.
2. Outline the main principles of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA 2004 and the procedures, which govern special education.
3. Describe the major issues and trends in special education and explain how these relate to general education and related fields
4. Describe the educationally relevant characteristics of exceptional children including curriculum accommodations and modifications
5. Develop an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of teachers, parents, students and other professionals related to special education
6. Identify the issues in definition and identification procedures for individuals with disabilities including those associated with individuals from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds
7. Define terms that are commonly used in special education
8. Identify procedures of assessment, identification and intervention using the Response to Intervention (RtI) approach for individuals who have exceptional needs.
9. Using the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach to design instruction to suit diverse learner needs.
10. Use technology and assistive technology as an effective tool to assist and accommodate individual needs of SWD

Figure 2  
*Reflection prompts*

1. **Strengths** (what the student can do, based on your interactions and observations. Consider language skills, intellectual functioning, social skills, academic skills):
2. **Weaknesses** (what the student needs to learn how to do in each of the above areas):
3. **Reflection:** Include the following:
  - a. what you did today with the student
  - b. what went well in the interactions & what didn't go as well
  - c. change of plans (if any) & rationale for it
  - d. what you learned from the interaction which will help you as a teacher in an inclusive classroom
  - e. what accommodations and adaptations will be needed in your classroom for students like these
  - f. any change of perceptions that you may have had as a result of this interaction
  - g. any change of skills that the student may have had as a result of this interaction (how this interaction has helped the student).

analysis method (Flick, 2013). We took a number of steps to ensure the credibility of the study (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach & Richardson, 2005). The first author, a special educator, developed a codebook to guide the content

analysis. Along with the second author, an educational psychologist, an initial sample of 10 reflections were independently, coded and the results were compared for validity. Special education terminology, definitions of

strengths and needs versus perceptions needed clarification and common understanding. The primary author established preliminary themes, and we looked for evidence inconsistent with these themes or outliers and discussed additional themes as a team. We came together to reconcile discrepancies and ambiguous phrases, check for possible biases, and reach consensus. The full sample of reflections were then analyzed, including a reanalysis of the initial 10. We discussed a small number of discrepancies in coding the utterances to reach a consensus. Finally, we enlisted two experts with expertise in special education, assessment, and qualitative analysis to review the analysis and provide critical feedback.

## Results

Using the constructs of competencies and beliefs consistent with our theoretical framework, a number of themes emerged. The number of coded responses in the analyzed reflection samples ( $n=70$ ), mean of utterances (coded responses per individual reflection) and range of responses is reported in Table 2.

### Pre-Service Teacher Competencies

The theme of competency was evidenced in multiple areas: identifying strengths in the SWD, identifying challenges or needs of SWD, and identifying differentiation strategies, accommodations, or instructional strategies for the SWD.

### Identifying Strengths in SWD

PST found competence in identifying a variety of strengths in their student partners. The frequency of responses in the theme of “identifying strengths” was 385, ranging from 0-14 utterances per reflection.

Strengths were identified in the areas of language and social skills, such as maintaining eye contact, being friendly, making jokes, and understanding and responding to questions during conversations. For example, one PST noted, “she is very social, and we had a good conversation. [S]he is able to distinguish a casual conversation and a conversation between a professor” (Participant 13).

Other strengths noted were in areas related to intellectual functioning and life skills, such as remembering the rules of a game, counting money, and using skills related to food.

The thing that surprised me was when we advanced to a harder level with more pictures that looked kind of the same; he sat there and stared at them for a while. I just let him continue to stare, but then out of nowhere he started putting them in the correct order without almost any hesitation. (Participant 11)

Strengths of SWD pertaining to learning by observation were revealed: “He was able to show that he can adapt to situations. For example, in the foosball game he was able to improve by watching how we played” (Participant 1). Participants also observed students showing the skills required for to pay for their food and to get their food on their own, and to eat independently.

Kaylee\* handed the cashier the money and waited patiently for change, knowing that she would be receiving change... She thanked me while I was helping her get her food... She seemed to have no problem finding somewhere to sit down... I would tell her funny stories, [and] she would understand and laugh along with all three of us. (Participant 16)

\*All names used in quotes are pseudonyms

Table 2  
*Frequency, Mean and Range of Coded Statements in Sample Reflections*

Theme	Occurrences recorded in reflections ( $n=70$ )			
	Frequency	Average	Range	
Competencies	a. Identifying strengths in SWD	385	5.5	0-14
	b. Identifying needs in SWD	258	3.7	0-10
	c. Identifying differentiation, accommodations and/or instructional strategies	192	2.8	0-11
Beliefs	a. Positive change in perception of SWD or working with SWD	115	1.64	0-6
	b. Overcoming fears of SWD or working with SWD	14	0.10	0-1

The strengths in language and communication were noted in both receptive and expressive language areas. Participants noted in the reflections that students used two components of communication, both verbal and nonverbal abilities, to communicate. Participants noted specific examples of SWD strengths in communication in their observations:

[L]ast, I would definitely mention Daniel's ability to use technology (his cell phone) as a strength. He knew how to type certain words or pull up certain pictures to show us what he was thinking of or referring to during our conversation definitely stood out to me as an advantage of his. (Participant 4)

Participants were able to gather observational evidence during the interactions. The instructor also provided support early in the experience for noting specific areas of strengths (e.g., "How do you know he understands?") and guided prompts during interactions.

Through their writing, participants demonstrated an ability to look for strengths - a deviation from the traditional way of viewing SWD through a deficit perspective (Cramer, Pellegrini-Lafont, & Gonzalez, 2014).

### Identifying Needs in SWD

Participants noted needs in the areas of language, cognition and social functioning during the interactions. The frequency of utterances in the theme of "identifying needs in SWD" was 258, with a range of 0-10 utterances addressing areas of need, per reflection. In the areas of language skills, participants observed needs in both receptive and expressive communication skills:

Sometimes he was hard to understand when he spoke because he would not speak clearly, and at times I wondered if he did not understand us because we would ask him a question and his answer made no sense with the question we asked. Another thing I noticed was that he agreed with anything and everything I said. (Participant 32)

Needs observed were mainly in the use of social communication. Participants displayed the competencies of looking for expected socially appropriate norms and etiquette. For example, one observed that a SWD "was indeed social, but it was still hard to get him to be the one to start the conversation" (Participant 31). Another PST noted:

Lena was in people's personal space often. I feel like Lena does not understand that when a person whispers you do not have to be in a person's personal space instead, you just need to lower your voice. (Participant 34)

Social communication skills are essential for socialization and job retention in SWD. Identifying the specific areas of need is an important skill for teachers in providing goals for learning tasks and setting up learning activities. Participants' reflections showed that they were able to pinpoint specific areas of need that addressed social proximity, intent, clarity, and reciprocity of communication.

Participants noted cognitive abilities of students as they engaged in social activities. Utterances addressing the cognitive abilities were in the areas of memory, processing time, and problem solving:

- As we were conversing with Corey, I noticed that he would hear what we were saying or asking, pause, then reply. I figured that this pause was to process what we were saying then what he was going to say (Participant 11).
- She asked this same question two more times...either because she does not have a good memory, or she might have been a little uncomfortable since she was going out of her comfort zone" (Participant 13).

Analysis of the PST's reflections suggest that, as illustrated in the excerpt above, participants were trying to understand the characteristics of their students and beginning to make connections to likely cognitive factors. Similarly, participants tried to infer other potential causative factors, beyond the disability, showing an ability to relate social, cognitive, and environmental factors to behaviors. Describing an issue that arose during one meeting, a PST noted, "Mostly it was because they kept interrupting each other, but I think that may have been due to their excitement over their discussion more than actual communication problems" (Participant 9). A few physical areas of need were noted such as in the area of speech articulation, movement, and motor skills. Participants were able to recognize the characteristics of specific disabilities: "Nora is dealing with ..... a form of Spina Bifida, which makes movements like walking a slow and tiring process for her" (Participant 5). Such statements suggest that the participants were able to make meaningful connections between course concepts and observed experiences.

Participants demonstrated the competency of identifying specific areas of need in areas of receptive and expressive language, social communication, and cognitive areas. They identified SWD's needs related to the ability to handle money, maintain a conversation (mainly in the skills of asking questions or initiating and continuing conversation), and use expected table manners.

### Identifying Accommodations and Instructional Strategies for SWD

If I had a student like Elena in my classroom, the most important accommodation I could provide for her is a longer wait time. She would take longer to answer us, but that was because it took longer for her to process the question and formulate a response. (Participant 1)

The competency of identifying intervention strategies and/or differentiating instruction, occurred in written statements with a frequency of 192, with a range of 0-11. PST displayed an ability to think of the SWD as potential students in their future inclusive classroom, noting the need for accommodations and/or instructional strategies. The most frequently noted was the need for more patience, and particularly more wait time for processing: “[I]f I were to have him participate in class, I think I would give him a heads up so he has enough time for him to process his thoughts and formulate an answer” (Participant 34). PST also identified the need for providing additional/written directions on assignments, assigning the SWD a partner to help them stay on task, and taking time to form positive relationships with SWD.

Participants displayed the ability to apply a major focus of the course: Universal Design for Learning (UDL). One participant stated she would “use choices wisely in class for optimum time spent and make sure to convey concepts in multiple ways so that students will understand them” (Participant 25). Another (Participant 2) indicated that the SWD she observed “would also need multiple ways of representation for speeches because she sometimes mumbles her words and occasionally is hard to understand.”

Participants also identified assistive technology they would use in their classroom to support their students’ learning, such as “iPads or communication devices” (Participant 35), “word cards” (Participant 30), or “assistive technology to aid with...fidgeting” (Participant 9). These suggested strategies revealed an ability of the participants to match the interventions to specific needs of their student partners. Overall, the reflections suggested that the participants recognized the need for accommodations to include the student successfully in their classrooms and the need to treat each student as an individual with his/her own strengths and needs.

### Pre-Service Teacher Beliefs

Evidence of the construct of beliefs emerged in several themes. PST reported positive beliefs about SWD/working with SWD ( $n=115$ , mean=1.64, range=0-6). We also found evidence of a theme of overcoming fears of SWD/working with SWD ( $n=14$ , mean=0.10, range=0-1).

### Changes in Pre-Service Teacher Beliefs

I know it is sort of bad of me to say, but I did not realize just how capable they were in functioning in a conversation or in a job but Mike definitely opened my eyes, and I know I will no longer have such harsh pre-judgments (Participant 23).

An overwhelming majority of participants corroborated their positive perceptions by sharing how they loved the lunch meetings with SWD and looked forward to it during class sessions. Many participants expressed general, but profound, changes in their beliefs about SWD: “Even though some have limitations, it is important to remember they are humans just like us. Their smiles, happiness, friendliness, and hearts are real” (Participant 8). Another participant noted “[t]hat exceptional students can have self-esteem issues and need to be nurtured just like any other student” (Participant 5). In other cases, changes in perceptions were more specific, and included new understandings about the diversity of SWD:

I learned that not all kids in a Special Education will be low functioning. That there will be students, like Renata, who are high functioning but still struggle in some way. I often think that Special Education students are low functioning, but this has changed my views on that. (Participant 21)

Finally, participants’ reflections revealed growth in their understanding of themselves as educators of SWD. For example, one noted that “the interaction helped me learn how to quickly change tactics when working with students” (Participant 16), revealing consideration of the need for flexibility. Others showed an awareness that they, as teachers, are responsible for ensuring that all of their students are welcomed and supported in their future classrooms: “Having lunch with Adolfo definitely opened my eyes, and I realized that there will be students in my classroom that will feel uncomfortable at first, and it is my job to make them feel normal” (Participant 35).

It should be noted that participants’ awareness of their obligation as teachers of SWD did not indicate negative reactions or reluctance. Rather, as the above quote suggests, they seemed to accept the responsibility for inclusion as customary.

### Overcoming Doubts and Fears

Our analysis of participants’ reflections revealed 14 utterances related to feeling nervous or awkward during an encounter or doubting their ability to effectively work with SWD.

[W]hen all the special needs students arrived, I became very apprehensive. I have never had the opportunity to work with people with special needs, and I was worried about realizing I did not have the patience for eventually teaching in that kind of environment. (Participant 32)

Of the 35 participants, 11 revealed such doubts within their first reflections. Three others were part of their final reflections; however, two of these were part of statements indicating that they no longer held such beliefs. For example, a PST admitted, “[I]ndividuals like Desmond, honestly, made me scared at times. I have no explanation for the feeling, but I know after spending this time with Desmond and learning about him and his personality, those fears went away” (Participant 15).

### Discussion

[I] am definitely more motivated to help every single student gain their own level of confidence no matter how long it will take and no matter their learning disability. It will be achieved, and I am determined to help aid in that. (Participant 11)

Our findings suggest that PST, at this early stage of their teacher education program, are able to recognize the unique skills and capabilities of SWD after this authentic social experience. The ability to identify strengths and needs provides a strong basis for creating appropriate supports for developing students’ academic, social, and life skills. The reflection responses on the strengths and needs also formed a good transition to the class discussion on varied types of disabilities and their characteristics. Since participants in the study were students in an introductory course, they were not familiar with nor expected to formally assess the skills of their SWD. However, participants were encouraged to provide observational evidence for their conclusions, and it is clear that their inferences went beyond merely noting challenges but moved to a level of trying to understand the underlying causes. Hence, the opportunities and continued interactions provided the participants with actual one-on-one experiences with understanding the manifestation of individual characteristics of these students. Participants also shared their personal experiences of the interactions during classroom discussions in order to positively extend the application of classroom learning.

The ability to move beyond the problem (the disability label) and see the person as an individual is an essential skill. Parents of students with developmental disabilities specifically note the need for teachers to understand and see the students as children first rather than labels (West & Pirtle, 2014). A strength-based paradigm shift encourages teachers to

view the students as having “potential” rather than being “at risk” (Hammond & Zimmerman, 2012). While most special education teacher training programs emphasize the strengths-based approach and advocate the use of strengths first while talking about the student, parents of SWD have voiced in the need for general education teachers to adopt this mindset as well (West & Pirtle, 2014). Our results confirm that authentic social experiences such as these can facilitate explicit strength-spotting and the development of a strengths-based perspective in all teachers.

PST were able to pinpoint strengths and needs in students with whom they interacted. Their responses indicate that they were analyzing the behaviors of students and making connections between their characteristics and likely cognitive factors associated with their strengths and needs as well. The competency of identifying specific strengths seemed to be facilitated by being able to work with a partner, thus enabling participants to alternate between interacting and observing. The opportunity to discuss their interactions in class also seemed to support their developing competence.

Further, reflections indicated that participants understood their responsibility to accommodate their teaching practices to support SWD in their classrooms. PST were able to apply course concepts to identify appropriate accommodations and strategies for SWD in their future classrooms. Their suggestions were consistent with UDL which encourages teachers to provide learning experiences via multiple modes and allow students to express their learning in various ways (Rose & Gravel, 2010). They also indicated the need for patience and more wait time to provide the much-needed processing time for most SWD. Wait time or extended time is an essential strategy in effectively supporting SWD (Johnson & Parker, 2013).

Our data reveal that the Let’s Have Lunch Experience had an impact on PST’s ability to see SWD as humans and as individuals with strengths and interests, as well as needs. Positive relationships between teachers and their students can significantly enhance student learning and success (Hattie & Yates, 2014). It appears that the informal social setting was an important factor that enabled PST to form positive connections with SWD.

Indeed, participants showed overwhelmingly positive perceptions about SWD. Our data suggest growth in participants’ perceptions of SWD as individuals well as in understanding their own responsibilities as inclusive teachers. Given that newer teachers can have fewer positive attitudes towards accommodating SWD (Lopes et al., 2004), facilitating positive beliefs can potentially lead them to be more effective as inclusive teachers.

Teacher beliefs about SWD have repercussions on a variety of outcomes, including student behavioral

problems (Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2012) and teacher behaviors and instructional decision making (Newman Thomas, 2014). Clearly, it is essential to prepare teachers to work effectively with SWD by providing experiences that enable PST to develop constructive perceptions about and attitudes toward SWD. The results of this study indicate that PST showed growth in positive beliefs after participating in the Let's Have Lunch Experience. Our results lend further credence to the idea that notions of teacher competence include beliefs as well as knowledge and skills (Kunter, et al., 2013; Pit-en Cate et al., 2018).

Our findings also confirmed what we would expect: that PST often feel some trepidation about working with SWD. While traditional field experiences in classroom settings can reveal the joys and challenges of an inclusion classroom, limited interactions with SWD, especially for general education PST, can leave them worried about whether they are equipped to effectively work with students who have special needs (Swain et al., 2012). In this study, 13 of 14 PST who expressed doubts and fears about working with SWD also noted that their concerns were alleviated. We are encouraged that the results of this study suggest that the Let's Have Lunch Experience was effective in allaying doubts and fears in all but one participant.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Although the intent of the social Let's Have Lunch Experience was to enable students with disabilities (SWD) to have adequate social interactions with same-aged peers, the experience proved to be an effective way to influence preservice teachers' (PST) competencies, change beliefs and alleviate fears about working with SWD. The preservice teachers of various teaching majors affirmed the success of this experience. In teacher education research, a common theme regarding field experiences is that they lead to more significant learning when activities are focused and well structured (Wilson et al., 2001). We would not suggest that such an experience be used as an intervention for those candidates who have negative attitudes about working with SWD. However, the interpretive analysis suggests that the influence of the Let's Have Lunch Experience on teacher competencies and beliefs is a promising one to help PST overcome their trepidations.

Participants in this study demonstrated competence in identifying students as individuals first by noting their specific strengths and challenges, then imagining likely accommodations they would need to make. They had an opportunity to interact with peer-aged SWD at a personal level in a social environment outside of traditional classroom-based, academically oriented encounters. This enabled them to observe and learn

while modeling the appropriate social skills for the students. The Let's Have Lunch Experience provided PST with the opportunity to immediately apply course concepts, such as UDL, as well as the chance to reflect on the experiences.

Participants at the foundation level of the teacher education program were able to imagine students in their future classrooms similar to those with whom they interacted and to suggest appropriate strategies to support them. For several of the participants, this was their first interaction with any individual with disability at such levels, and our evidence suggests that the experience enabled them to overcome their past fears about having SWD in their classrooms.

We suggest that teacher preparation programs can avail of partnerships with local schools to enable positive experiences such as the Let's Have Lunch Experience. Involving PST in early experiences that require them to socialize with SWD may help them to alter their beliefs about inclusion and raise their competency levels. It also provides faculty members a chance to model effective practice outside the classroom and link theory to practice. We would encourage programs to collect data to add to the body of research, especially in larger programs.

While our findings are encouraging, additional research would help address several unanswered questions. The participants in this study were PST at the foundations level. While special education majors get additional coursework and experiences in their program, further studies on the impact of such experiences on general education majors could be conducted to see if the skills, competencies and attitudinal shift carry over during their advanced program experiences and into their teaching careers.

PST met with different students during the course of the experience in order to expose them to students with a variety of strengths and needs. Some of their reflections noted an improvement in social skills of the student, but a fuller examination was beyond the scope of the current study. Having the same PST and SWD matchup for several sessions could create the opportunity for PST to measure the improvement in social skills of the SWD. It could also help reveal whether PST's observation skills improve over time.

Our study documented PST's competencies with regard to applying course concepts. It is possible that some participants, particularly those with prior experiences interacting with SWD, were already able to identify students' strengths, needs, and potential strategies. Additional research to establish a baseline would help determine whether including an experiential component to the course facilitates growth in PST's competencies.

Developing professional competencies and positive teacher beliefs is an important goal of any teacher

preparation program. Our study did not make comparisons between PST majoring in special education and other education majors. More studies could shed light on similarities and differences in teacher competencies and beliefs among these groups as a result of non-traditional field experiences.

Since educators' level of engagement with, as well as attitude and sense of responsibility toward, SWD are critical factors in the effectiveness of inclusive classrooms, we must continue to explore varied models of teacher preparation. Innovative field experiences such as the Let's Have Lunch Experience can be developed and executed within coursework to enhance PST's competencies and positive beliefs towards teaching students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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