

Graduate Students' Initial Exploration of Teaching Students with Disabilities in Physical Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning master's degree students ascribed to their first semester of experience teaching students with severe and profound disability (SPD) in a physical education (PE) practicum. This study utilized a narrative inquiry design and interviews were conducted with four graduate students focusing on their perceptions, experiences, and thoughts of teaching students with SPD in PE. Narrative research is used in the studies of educational practices and experiences, and conceptualizes teachers as storytellers who individually and socially lead storied teaching and professional lives (Connelly &

Clandinin, 1990). As part of their coursework, each participant completed hands-on practicum experiences teaching students with SPD. Data were collected through demographic questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, reflective journaling, and e-mail correspondences. Data were analyzed utilizing narrative analyses and three themes emerged; (a) learning about caring, (b) assessing students with disabilities, and (c) real life and daily realities. Overall, this study demonstrated that participants interpreted their experiences as difficult and challenging, yet rewarding. They reported that the experience helped change their perceptions about disability and caring relationships with students with disabilities, and understand concerns related to assessing and teaching students with SPD.

Key Words: *Adapted Physical Education, Practicum, Severe and Profound Disabilities, Teacher Training, Graduate Students, Exploration*

Introduction

When parents of students with severe disabilities send their child to special education or adapted physical education (APE) programs (that is, physical education [PE] for those with special needs), they expect that highly qualified and well experienced teachers are available to teach and assist their child (Healy, Block & Judge, 2014). Kelly (2006) defines highly qualified APE teachers as those who can demonstrate competency in 10 comprehensive areas. These include knowledge in disability studies; assessment methods for service qualification and instructional design; report writing; special education law; development of individualized education programs (IEP); adaptations and modification for PE; behavior management,

individual teaching and learning styles; collaboration and consultation skills; community and family resources; and professional leadership. However, in the United States (US), a shortage of highly qualified special education and APE teachers exists (DeMik, 2008). Billingsley (2004) stated that one of the most important challenges in APE is to develop a qualified workforce and create work environments that sustain APE teachers' involvement and commitment in the field. It is essential that teacher education programs training APE specialists continue to increase the number of graduate teacher candidates who can teach students with various types and levels of disabilities. Because of these needs, this research centers on the training of university-aged students who were pursuing teaching credentials in APE yet had little to no previous teaching experiences prior to their current program. For many university-aged students, practicum experiences represent their first time providing instruction for students with disabilities. Practicum experiences, or field experiences, are organized experiences which provide participants with a pre-specified number of hours observing and assisting teachers, and/or teaching in formal or informal settings (Beyer, 1984). These experiences can be either lab-based (i.e., on-campus) or field-based (i.e., off-campus) and are considered an essential component of teacher training that helps pre-service teachers develop skills and competencies in classroom management, make progress in their teaching profession, and can influence them to stay in the profession longer (Cameron, Lovett, & Berger, 2007). Research-based recommendations for teacher preparation suggest that practicum experiences that are coupled with APE coursework should include experiences: (a) of the daily realities of schools and classrooms (Sleeter, 2008), (b) within the role of APE specialists in schools (Sato & Haegele, 2016), (c) with a wide variety of instructional strategies and assurance of effective teaching taught by cooperative teachers (Sato & Haegele, 2016), and (d) in diverse environments such as schools educating children

with various disabilities (Burden, Hodge, O'Bryant, and Harrison, 2004). Furthermore, Hodge, Tannehill, and Kluge (2003) suggest that pre-service teachers tend to have positive experiences teaching students with disabilities when they receive multiple and interactive opportunities, supervision from a cooperative teacher and/or university supervisor, and successful orientation (e.g., one on one lesson, and small teaching opportunities). Such experiences in teacher preparation can help minimize teacher candidates' stereotypic beliefs about various demographic populations and improve teacher's attitudes toward working with those with disabilities (Sleeter, 2008).

Practicum experiences may be especially important when those experiences focus on areas of high need. For example, recently there has been serious concern regarding the shortages of APE program graduates who are prepared to teach students with severe and profound disabilities (SPD) (Zhang, 2003). For example, Ammah and Hodge (2006) describe PE teachers who suggest that the complexity of instructing students with SPD in inclusive setting was challenging because of the need for teacher time and attention. Furthermore, low retention rates of those working with this population puts additional strain on administrators to find qualified individuals (Zhang, 2003). SPD can be defined as a severe chronic condition attributable to cognitive or physical impairment of a person that is likely to result in substantial functional limitation in three or more major life activities (e.g., self-care, receptive and expressive language, learning, mobility) and will continue indefinitely (Hodge, Lieberman, & Murata, 2012). SPD have many different causes (e.g., trisomy 18, deaf blindness, CHARGE syndrome) and many children with SPD have more than one disability (e.g., autism spectrum disorder and a visual

impairment). Regardless of the cause of the SPD, a number of attributes can be present which makes APE instruction challenging, such as limited levels of awareness, a lack of communication, and medical complications (Hodge et al., 2012).

For individuals who are new to teaching, practicum experiences can provide initial hands-on experience with students with disabilities, including those with SPD. According to Strand and Johnson (1990), early practicum experiences help beginning teachers overcome and develop effective teaching skills, because pre-service teachers receive (a) various opportunities to observe other APE teachers' teaching, (b) feedback and suggestions regarding to how to teach and develop lesson plans for students with disabilities, and (c) a variety of teaching situations that maximize the opportunity for success. Currently, there has been an influx of graduate level students who are pursuing APE degrees or certifications, yet have little to no background experience. Based on our interest in the field of APE, our concerns of a lack of highly qualified APE teachers, as well as inadequate graduate training of teaching SPD in PE, the purpose of this study was to explore the meaning master's degree students ascribed to their first semester of experience teaching students with SPD in a PE practicum.

Method

Research Design

A narrative inquiry design was utilized and interviews were conducted with four graduate students focusing on their perceptions, experiences, and thoughts of teaching students with SPD in PE. Narrative research is used in the studies of educational practices and experiences, and conceptualizes teachers as storytellers who individually and socially lead storied teaching and professional lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). According to Colombo, Lisle, and Mano (1997), stories are defined as "the way we make sense of our lives and the APE profession: by

telling themselves (graduate students in this study) who they are, why they are there, how they come to be what they are, what they value most, and how they see the APE professions (p.5).”

Narrative research is the study of how human beings experience the world, and the researchers collect these stories and write narratives about these experiences (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). Demik (2008) explains that in order to complete narrative research, researchers must take into account all angles of an experience, from all directions, and consider its position in time, space, and personal as well as social context. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated that participants’ multiple perspectives impact value and authenticity to “mere experiences” (p. 50).

Participants

Participants were graduate (master’s level) students enrolled in a PE teaching license certificate program with APE certification at one public university located in the Midwest region of the US. There were seven physical education majors in the PETE program at the time of this study. A criterion sampling strategy was used, which meant we sampled cases meeting a predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 2002). Specifically, we identified and selected all master students who were assigned to practicum experiences at schools for developmental disabilities and were enrolled associated seminars during their first semester of the PETE program. This process involved submitting an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application and receiving approval to conduct the study. Next, we contacted the institution’s clinical officers to identify all master students who completed criminal background checks. Four participants (John, Kyle, Brianna, and Daniel), two males and two females, volunteered for this study. Each of the participants earned a bachelor’s degree in exercise science, health promotion, sport studies, or sport management prior to enrolling in their respective programs. APE was a new academic field of study for all participants upon entering the graduate program, and none had substantial

previous experience teaching students with physical and intellectual disabilities. All participants were graduate assistants for a PE and/or APE program. This study took place during each of the students' first semester in their respective graduate programs.

Participant 1: John. John (age 28) received a bachelor's degree in exercise science with a concentration of strength conditioning. He identified as an American football player and had numerous coaching experiences. After he graduated from his undergraduate program in exercise science, he worked as a strength conditioning trainer at the college level. After five years of job experience, he was motivated to teach PE in an urban school setting. He did not have any teaching or coaching experiences with students with disabilities. During his first semester, he was assigned to complete several online APE courses, acted as a graduate teaching assistant for an undergraduate APE course, and supervised a school-based APE field experience for undergraduates teaching students with developmental disabilities. He completed more than 100 hours of APE practicum experiences observing and interacting with 2nd to 4th graders with SPD (neurological disorders). He also volunteered at Special Olympic bowling and adapted aquatics events.

Participant 2: Kyle. Kyle (age 42) received a bachelor's degree in sport management. He was an assistant women's basketball coach at two different universities and had 20 years of coaching experiences. After 20 years, he had interest in teaching PE. He did not have any teaching and coaching experiences with students with disabilities. However, his nephew (10 years old) has autism spectrum disorder and he was knowledgeable about some school based procedures, such as IEPs. He enrolled in one APE graduate course in the first semester. In addition, he completed more than 150 hours of field experiences in adapted aquatics and APE at

a school for students with developmental disabilities. He was interested in working with pre-school children with developmental disabilities.

Participant 3: Brianna. Brianna (age 24) was an international graduate student from Romania. She was a track and field student athlete and received an athletic scholarship to complete her bachelor's degree in sport studies. She joined the PE master's degree program because she coached a track and field team (after school program) at a local pre-school and elementary school and wanted to pursue a teaching position. She coached one child with a visual impairment during her track and field coaching experience. As part of her graduate teaching assistantship, she was asked to act as an assistant of an undergraduate APE course and supervisor of APE field experiences for students with disabilities at school for children with developmental disabilities. She also completed more than 100 hours of APE practicum experiences at high schools (age 16-20) with students with SPD (neurological disorders). She also volunteered at Special Olympic bowling and swimming events.

Participant 4: Denny. Denny (Age 23) received a bachelor's degree in health promotion. She was a dance and gymnastics coach for a summer camp and local school districts. After she graduated from an undergraduate program in health promotion, she worked as a health and nutritionists for several child care centers. After a few years of job experience, she joined the master's PE teacher education program. She did not have any teaching and coaching experiences with students with disabilities. However, she began to help special education classes and APE classes for students with SPD (between ages 18-21) during her first semester in the program. She

completed more than 100 hours of field experiences in special education, therapy training, and APE at a school for students with developmental disabilities.

Data Collection

The primary data sources for this study were a demographic questionnaire, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, and reflective journaling (Patton, 2002). In addition, follow-up correspondence using e-mail messaging was used (Meho, 2006).

Demographic questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was used to collect descriptive quantifiable data regarding the graduate students. This questionnaire was designed to examine the degree to which the master's degree students were being prepared for future careers (e.g., APE teaching positions). It consisted of three subsets of questions, including those about: (a) respondents' goals (e.g., motives for teaching APE or perceptions of collaboration with other teachers); (b) the practicum sites (e.g., transition, mission statement, student demographic information, teaching duration, and educational resources); and (c) working with their cooperating teacher.

Interviews

Two interviews were conducted with participant individually during the midweek of fall 2014 and spring 2015 semesters. The lead researcher planned to conduct monthly interviews.

However, there were schedule conflicts between the researcher and participants. Therefore, the midterm and final practicum interviews were scheduled in both semesters. Using a face-to-face interviewing approach, the lead researcher asked the participants thoughtful questions about

assessment, and initial interaction with students with disabilities in midterm interview questions.

For example, participants were asked:

- In what ways have you become more like APE teachers?
- How have you adjusted or adapted to APE teachers' roles and responsibilities in general?
- How did the cooperating teacher understand your issues and concerns with the roles and responsibilities of APE professionals in the practicum?
- How did you develop your own vision of career goals and objectives as being a teacher in this profession?

The face-to-face interviews lasted 75 to 100-minutes, remained open-ended, and assumed a conversational tone. The modified interviews were guided by a pre-established set of questions developed by Pawlas and Olivia's (2008), Sato and Hodge (2009), and Sato, Fissette, and Walton (2013). These questions were carefully worded to ensure relevancy to the environment and experiences, and were considerate of the characteristics of narrative inquiry to elicit related responses. For this study, the specific questions were modified and carefully worded to be relevant to the current investigation of graduate students in APE graduate program (Yin, 2003).

Reflective journaling

Hodge and Faison-Hodge (2010) argue that teacher education programs can enhance future teachers' ability to reflect on their pedagogical practice. Research confirms that reflective journaling is beneficial to the training of teaching students with disabilities in PE for undergraduate and graduate students (Hodge et al., 2003). In the present study, we used a reflective log developed by Hodge et al. (2003), which was modified and revised to measure graduate students' practicum experiences with students with disabilities in PE. All participants

were asked to maintain a journal bulletin discussion and teaching folio that included bi-weekly self-reflections based on their experiences and prompted by a set of guiding questions. All teachers were required to submit responses to specific journal reflection questions to the course instructor. Each question had a 600-word maximum and was submitted as a bulletin board discussion post in the course webpage.

Email communication

E-mail messages were used to ask follow-up questions and/or to seek clarification of previous responses (Meho, 2006). When there was a need to clarify the contents of the interviews in written format, the researcher asked each participant to respond by e-mail.

Data Analysis

A narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) was used to interpret the data. Narrative is retrospective meaning making – the shaping or ordering of past experiences. Narrative is a way of understanding one’s own actions as well as the actions of others, and seeing the consequences of actions and events overtime (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Data analysis cannot be easily distinguished from transcription of the data sources (interviews or journal reflections). Mishler (1995) noted that “how we arrange and rearrange the interview texts in light of discoveries is a process of clarifying and deepening our understanding of what is happening in the discourse” (p. 277).

The data analysis began with the identification of participants’ stories contained within each interview. The lead researcher and graduate students (Kyle, John, Brianna, and Denny) read and discussed several common examples of participants’ stories related to teaching students with SPD after the end of practicum experiences. Each participant offered his or her story narratives

of “*what happened in the practicum experiences*” and “*how did she or he deal with situations or events?*” to depict a learning process in the APE practicum experiences. All graduate students read their own interview transcripts and journals and found the meaning of their APE practicum experiences. First, they compared their own interview transcripts and journals, and identified individual themes regarding the APE practicum experiences. The collected pieces of data in the transcripts from the set of interviews and journal reflection with each participant were coded independently by the first and second authors. Second, each participant discussed any positive and negative teaching experiences of their students with SPD compared to the researchers’ themes of practicum experiences to arrive at an agreement (100%). Then they edited the quotes as deemed necessary for proper vocabulary and grammar that aligned with each theme.

Results and Discussion

Based on the data analysis, three themes emerged from the graduate student’ narratives, explainable through the narrative inquiry and story lines, the themes were: (a) *learning about caring*, (b) *assessing students with disabilities*, and (c) *practicum paradigm shift experiences*.

Theme 1: Learning about Caring

Overall, the participants in this study developed perceptions about teaching students with SPD that fell within a continuum that ranged from caring (participants’ motivation and hope about the benefits for some students with SPD and their own efficacy) to student aides (participants and students with SPD shared reciprocal, rewarding, and fun experiences through practicum experiences; Shokoohi-Yekta & Hendrickson, 2010). According to Hartup (1996), there are four factors that affect caring development between pre-service teachers and students

with SPD, which include (a) child characteristics, (b) child social competency, (c) social context, and (d) the developmental context. They had opportunities to witness positive perception shifts and interactions (helping, befriending and caring behaviors) with students with SPD.

Each of the participants alluded to the experience of teaching students with SPD as being difficult and complex. However, the development of social engagement between the participants and the students with SPD they worked with, and factors that influenced these engagements, was evident across participants. For example, Denny said that:

“ When I joined my practicum experiences, I had three questions. How I am going to react when I see a student with SPD? Do I change my behavior? and how much do I have to change? I started to figure it out. Now I completed more than 80 hours of field experiences, I can show you my journal here I think it is problematic that I treat a students’ disability as a part of their personality, because I feel that there are stereotypes related to disability. I always try to find what they can or cannot do..... When I interact with students with disabilities more, I realized that my students with disabilities are same with my best friends. We learned how to care about each other. I started to learn what severity and disability mean to my friend ” (Denny, interview).

Denny explained her reasons for caring for students with disabilities. It was the first time she interacted with and assisted students with disabilities in an educational setting. She was anxious and isolated (she did not know how to work with students with SPD) in the new practicum site.

Han and Chadsey (2004) note that the most frequent reason graduate students report having anxiety symptom in teaching students with SPD is that they have limited opportunity for interaction and a lack of understanding behavioral patterns of students of SPD. She described her reasons for caring as *“I needed a social and emotional connection with students with disabilities in the practicum and I wanted to learn something about disability, and I wanted to help if students with disabilities allowed me to do so.”* These are altruistic motives for caring formation as well as the underlying assumption of reciprocity (i.e., give and take) in relationships

(Shokoohi-Yekta & Hendrickson, 2010). John also explained that he found himself acting as a brother, assistant, helper, and care giver during his practicum experiences.

“ I saw my student’s IEP and medical reports. I read the report about what my student can do and cannot do. For example, he was diagnosed with a neurological disorder and he has a visual impairment. In the report, he cannot see.....but, I found that he was able to see sometimes. None of the cooperating teachers realized that he could see. I learned that the symptoms and severity of disability can change periodically. It could be sudden or maybe gradual. I do not know, but I think observation is extremely important. I think graduate students can become a friend and have good relationships with them. I believe that it is different with teachers’ positioning, so we can sense something many teachers did not realize...” (John, interview).

John’s story was that he understood and recognized the students’ ability (student’s ability to see) his cooperating teachers and staff could not find. Evidences for identifying students’ competence or weakness were based on various observations and interactions in the practicum. Sato and Haegele (2016) described the importance of providing experiences for graduate students to gain an understanding of non-instructional components of practicum such as monitoring and evaluating self-care or independent skills at practicum sites. He was intrinsically motivated to monitor and care about his students’ behaviors, because he felt there was a mutual involvement in the engagement, including trust and loyalty (Zajac & Hartup, 1997), that helped his emotional development and positive social behaviors (Gordon, Feldman, & Chiriboga, 2005). Although John agreed that all teachers and students should respectively follow rules and regulations regarding the students’ medical conditions, he patiently sought his students’ unexpected exploration (e.g., he found his students had functional vision).

Kyle also shared a story of the turning point of when his perception changed about students with disabilities. When he began to work with his students with disabilities, his perceptions were that individual differences associated with disabilities was seen as something that could be “*remediated away or fixed*” (medical model; Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012).

Disability conceptualized in the medical model is exemplified by a reliance on medical professionals and staff as gatekeepers who have access to recourse and benefits (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). The conceptualization of disability as being something that is “*fixable*” is a common expression within the medical model of disability discourse (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). His personal judgment was that having a disability was a problem. However, his perception changed and views of students with disabilities changed as a result of his experience:

“ One day, we did a catch and release activity with yarn balls and I mumbled “I am tired....many balls here it goes....” and picked up balls on gym floors and put balls on table attached to wheelchairs.....My students touch my back when I was picking up balls. I realized that my student understood what I was mumbling about and showed their expressions.....that was an emotional connection. I think that my student taught me how to care about others in that moment “ (Kyle, interview).

Kyle explained that practicum experiences allowed him to develop a much deeper and broader understanding of disability as a part of human experiences and position disability as difference that is potential source of interests (Baglieri, Valle, Connor & Gallagher, 2010). His practicum experience was a learning opportunity where he re-conceptualized disability as a social construction and understood students’ personality, family, cultural aspects as well as acknowledgment of the physiological aspects of impairment and function (Ferguson & Nasbaum, 2012).

Brianna submitted her last journal titled “real interaction with students with disabilities”. She wrote “*all teachers need to observe what skills are beneficial or helpful for building caring relationships. We also need to think how to include those skills in student’s curriculum*”. She believed that academic and caring skills are important curriculum considerations in the practicum (Gordon, Feldman, & Chiriboga, 2005). She also wrote that “*hemwe offer opportunities to learn skills (such as shaking hands or eye contacts) and allow students opportunities to practice them in the class, recess, and lunch time or outside of schools*”. Stories from Kyle, John, Denny and

Brianna about caring relationships demonstrate a variety of factors that influenced their perspectives toward the abilities of those with SPD and the roles that teachers can play in their lives.

Theme 2: Assessing Students with Disabilities

All participants found that engaging in formal assessment practices greatly improved their learning process as being reflective practitioners. They appreciated the assessment opportunities to experience implementing formal assessments, such as the Test for Gross Motor Development-II (TGMD-II; Ulrich, 2000) and Adapted Physical Education Assessment Scale-II (APEAS-II; SHAPE America, 2015), and informal assessments about various aspects of the targeted motor skills in the PE contexts (Gable, Park, & Scott, 2014). These assessment practices helped all participants develop an understanding of how assessment and evaluation data is gathered and is used to determine instructional choices (D'Souza, 2011). Furthermore, all participants expressed hope that their students would demonstrate high levels of psycho-motor competency during the assessment practices. While the participants reported that they wanted the students to receive high scores, they understood that it was unethical to inflate scores during the assessment practices. Their ethical focus on assessment norms, values, and principles was governed by professional conduct (Strike & Ternasky, 1993). Kyle explained that:

“ We used formal assessments to measure my students’ independence. I was not allowed to help students during the assessment process. I really wanted to help, but it was emotionally hard. I saw performance criteria of throwing quality of APEAS – II and I hoped my student would achieve and meet the target level of performance. I prayed, but they did not meet. That frustrated me. I could not encourage them during the performance either..... That is very tough.....My dilemma was that my students met the targets when I did informal assessments, but they did not pass the targeted skills during the formal assessment. I wanted to use the data from the informal assessment, but I have to report the formal assessment data as the priority” (Kyle, interview).

Kyle believed that informal assessments were beneficial to identify problems with motor skills and identify the most appropriate conditions for APE classes (Floyd, Phaneuf, & Wilczynski, 2005). He wanted to report the data of informal assessments, because the students performed the targeted skill behaviors. However, he learned that formal assessment data must be used as the primary source for evaluating motor skills. Errors related to his misinterpretation of the data could have caused him to draw incorrect conclusions regarding the goals and objectives in IEPs and lesson plans (McIntosh, Brown, & Borgmeier, 2008). Norwich (2009) explains that teachers need to resolve their identification dilemma that veers strongly towards the commonality option, playing down differences, and working for a curriculum and lessons that implement flexible and customizable measures for all students. Brianna felt that she had a hard time selecting and administering appropriate assessment tools:

“ Assessment is one challenge that I was concerned about. I struggled to find appropriate assessment tools for my students. My struggle was that when I used the TGMD-II, there were six loco-motor and object control skills, one of my students had crutches and ambulatory assistive devices. So he could walk, but it did not fit in to the loco-motor performance criteria. I could score them as absent (0 point), but I did not want to. That was my dilemma of assessing students with disabilities in PE “ (Brianna, interview).

Brianna suggested that functional assessments may produce more positive outcomes than non-functional assessments (e.g., TGMD-II or APEAS-II) in PE (Newcomer & Lewis, 2004). She suggested that the “*first step to success*” assessment (combination of functional and motor skills) as an appropriate assessment instrument for students with SPD in PE (Carter & Horner, 2007).

Universally, all participants had questions and doubts about how to grade PE learning outcomes for students with SPD at the end of the semester. For example, John explained that:

“ I need to learn about how to grade students with disabilities. My cooperative teachers told me that it depends on how students’ IEPs said. I wondered how we evaluated students’ efforts and enthusiasm as a part of the grading criteria. I know that we must have a grading system and learning outcome base, but I believe that grading may also become a motivational factor of students’ learning outcomes.....I find that grading must be score or

percentile based, not descriptive base. That makes students' grading outcomes are different. That is what I learned..." (John's reflective journaling).

John's reflection on his use and understanding of the purpose of grading changed throughout the semester. He believed that students' learning outcomes, efforts, and enthusiasm must be analyzed and evaluated to articulate students' grades in a highly visible manner (D'Souza, 2011). However, he believed that he should use both informal and formal assessments, stating in his journal that *"if I used the formal assessment PE data of my student, he would not be able to pass and would have to retake PE again. That is not my educational philosophy....."* DeMik (2008) describes that new graduate students need to find strategies to survive in their dilemma of evaluating students with SPD and find creative ways to inspire and educate students with SPD. Then help students with SPD find their learning success.

Denny explained her concerns of accommodating and modifying PE assessments for students with SPD. She said that *"I do not know how to accommodate and modify assessments for students with disabilities. Plus how do I know my accommodations and modifications are appropriate? I also do not know the terminology differences between accommodation and modification. I asked all teachers and staff, they had various responses"*. She learned that assessment modifications and accommodations must be consistent with the students' IEP, be used in the instruction, and avoid unfair advantage or treatments to students with disabilities (Thurlow, House, Boys, Scott, Ysseldyke, 2000). She did not receive answers about the appropriateness of modification and accommodation, but she understood the concepts of accommodations that refer to changes in presentation, demonstration, response, and setting and modification that refer to alternation to assessment test (American Educational Research Association, 1999).

Theme 3: Real Life and Daily Realities

Each participant in this study experienced challenges when trying to make activities meaningful and interpreting student responses. Each participant began their respective practicum experience believing that they were going to utilize developmental curricula focused on motor skills. However, after meeting and instructing students with SPD for the first time, they each had real life and daily reality experiences where they modified their views to believing that they should develop lessons appropriate for the student's mental age (Lyons & Cassebohn, 2012) and utilize functional curricula which include personal and care support in all academic subjects (e.g., PE) and facilitate recreational engagement. They learned how to appropriately modify curriculum content, lessons, and assessments for students with disabilities in the practicum experiences, and felt that when students were unable to benefit from modifications, it was important to provide additional or alternative curriculum. All participants integrated care-related skills such as eating, toileting, washing, and recreational engagements into their PE curriculum. The participants realized that while their master's level courses focused on theory and pedagogical practices, the field experiences enhanced their ability to recognize and instruct functional content and life skills that can be used at home, school, and community domains (Nieptupski, Hamre-Nietupski, Curtin, & Shrikanth, 1997). Denny mentioned that:

“ When I taught PE for my students with disabilities, I had to have a different mindset about what and how PE worked for them. My teaching experiences in the APE practicum included teaching fine motor skills (how to use fingers). My APE cooperating teachers required me to teach how to keep pressing the button of a milk shake blender. I thought that this was not APE class, but my cooperating teacher said this is PE for them. It took a few weeks for me to get used to it. I thought the purpose of PE was to integrate psycho-motor, cognitive, and affective domains of learning and teaching, but now I understand that functional skills (independent and self-care skills) are the top priority of PE for those with SPD “ (Denny, interview).

Another challenge that all participants experienced through these practicum experiences was realizing that they, as teachers, needed to change their communication patterns to help students with disabilities capture social meaning and consequences during the PE classes. Brianna, for example, explained the following:“ (Brianna, Journal reflection)

Brianna also said that it was important to her to understand her students’ social, cultural, and historical contexts as much as her students’ disability (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012). She avoided the “*washout effect*” phenomena, which occurs when new ideas and beliefs appear to be developed without obtaining students’ characteristics, academic, and social backgrounds. She found valuable time applying and demonstrating what they learned from the students’ backgrounds to practices during real teaching experiences (Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). Throughout the practicum experiences, she felt that she could have valuable social relationships with students with disabilities (Bierman, 2004). Kevin shared his initial teaching experiences of students with SPD, but he gradually developed positive caring behaviors during the practicum experiences.

“ My perception about my students with disabilities changed from feeling sorry for them to respecting their independence, self-reliance, and self-support. When I assisted APE classes, I thought my students could not do anything without someone’s help. I positioned myself that I was not well motivated, because I did not experience emotional and social connections with my students. I sometimes mumbled to myself when I helped and supported my students. I assumed that my students would not be able to catch and comprehend what I was saying....but I respect my student’s daily behaviors and routines in the class. Every day is case by case. I could not predict student’s behaviors. It could be positive or negative behaviors. I respect all of them. I felt I have slight friendship with my student “ (Kevin, interview).

Although caring development with students with SPD can be a complex process, cooperative teachers, university supervisors, and parents should encourage and facilitate caring relationship building opportunities for all participants in APE (Han & Chadsey, 2004).

John and Kyle mentioned that two more important components that contributed to their students' learning experiences in APE classes. John said that:

“ I learned that I need to compare and contrast everything in my APE classes. When I teach general PE classes, I always think about a routine like typical PE classes, like warm up, main lessons, and cool down..... but when I taught students with disabilities in APE, I learned that I always pay attention to students' knowledge (cognition) about color identification, size of balls, and touching. I have to maximize sensory stimulations in the PE class. That is why I compare and contrast various types of balls using different senses (touch, seeing, or smell). These practices may help students become independent learners “(John, interviews).

John believed that it was important that the teachers encourage students to look at equipment (e.g., balls or beanbags) closely and think about the purpose and significance of each piece in the APE class (Schneider, 2002). Schneider (2002) explains that the practices of comparing and contrasting objects help students with disabilities to categorize sensory functions based on color, texture, and size and to explore the process of thinking and self-questions about the activities. Lastly, Kyle learned that it was not always important for those teaching students with SPD to have pre-planned and rigid lesson plans and activities. Rather, he felt that it was important to prepare a wide variety of creative lessons, materials (task cards and pictures), and equipment and allow students with disabilities to have choices regarding what they would like to do in APE classes. Kyle explained that

“ Based on answering your question, I learned that APE teachers always prepare a wide variety of activities and lessons and give students choices in the class. I think it is very different with general PE class. One of my personal challenges is that I do not know how to reduce or eliminate gaps between my various lessons, goals, and objectives in IEPs. I know that I have to design several creative lessons that help my students' learning, but some IEPs give much more detail and I could not design lessons in creative ways. I hope you understand what I mean... ” (Kyle, e-mail communication).

Kyle also said that his ideal APE lesson included asking students to create projects (e.g., building castle with buckets), an activity that allows students to think about size, height, and other measurements and demonstrate their knowledge and skills. He felt that although teaching

students with disabilities and developing lesson plans (meeting goals and objectives in IEPs) was challenging, he was pleased and appreciated his practicum experiences.

Summary of Findings

The overall picture drawn from this study was that these graduate students interpreted their APE apprenticeships as difficult, challenging, yet rewarding. These students felt they needed extended training in order to work more comfortably with students with SPD and to provide more developmentally and socially appropriate APE instruction. However, they reported that the experience helped change their perceptions about disability and social interaction with students with disabilities. In order to develop their own self-efficacy and self-confidence for teaching students with students with SPD, all graduate students suggested that further development activities (e.g., professional development workshops, APE graduate student seminars) should be offered and designed to equip them with the advanced knowledge and skills necessary to teach students with SPD (Sato, Hodge, Murata, & Maeda, 2007).

A limitation of this study was that qualitative inquiries, including narrative studies, typically use small samples, and in the logic of criterion sampling, the intent is to capture and describe the central themes that represent the phenomena under study for a particular cohort of interest (Patton, 2002). Our intent in using this sampling approach was to uncover common themes of students' initial teaching experiences in APE practicum. The other limitation was that observation could be used to further explain master students' experiences and the challenges they encountered during teaching students with SPD.

Implications for Practice

This study focused on the practicum experiences of graduate students enrolled in APE programs. The results provide a number of recommendations that can be applied to future practicum experiences to help improve the meaningfulness of those programs. First, participants in this study described an experience of caring relationship development with students with SPD. In the future, practicum experience supervisors should further explain the development of these caring relationships, within the framework of Hatup's suggested factors, to participating graduate students prior to the practicum experiences. This way, future students can isolate instances where these experiences are being developed and report these instances in their reflective journals. For researchers, the addition of focus interviews with cooperating teachers, as well as graduate students, and direct observations and/or field notes of graduate students working with students with SPD would further enhance our understanding of the development of caring relationships between pre-service teachers and students with SPD by offering a more diverse perspective toward this development. (Day & Harry, 1999).

Second, an obvious need for the graduate students in this study was for further training conducting assessments for students with SPD. The university supervisor taught concepts of assessment (testing students with SPD) though routine data collection and analysis of informal and formal assessments. Through the training, the graduate students were tasked with investigating possible biases and experienced challenges that commonly affect IEP goals and objectives development of students with SPD (Koretz & Barton, 2003). These graduate students used two standardized assessments, the TGMD-II and APEAS-II, during the APE practicum. However, other or additional assessments, those that are more context-sensitive and comparative,

may need to be included in future practicum. Functional assessments and criterion reference assessments should be added to the assessment practices in the APE practicum experiences.

Lastly, graduate students faced two major challenges of teaching students with SPD in these practicum experiences. Those were making activities, lessons, and assessments meaningful and interpreting students' academic and social responses (Browder, Lee, & Mims, 2011). The graduate students gradually felt that they provide one-on-one care and support throughout practices which allow the students they worked with to experience success (Sato, et al., 2007; Sato & Hodge, 2009). Master students should practice articulating the need for cognitive, affective, and psycho-motor curriculum, especially for planning lessons and evaluation purposes. Additionally, while assessment is one of the most important topics in education today, assessment used for evaluating the effectiveness of instruction must be emphasized. DeMik (2008) recommends that cooperating teachers and university supervisors should provide students' academic, behavioral, and family backgrounds in order to understand students' characteristics and needs of students with disabilities. This would help master students increase their self-confidence in working with students with disabilities. University supervisors need to establish academic resources (e.g., behavioral analysis text books, special education text books, and activity manuals) for working with all types of students with disabilities. Collaborating and supporting each other, and realizing the value of students with disabilities, graduate students promote positive teaching and learning environment in the practicum experiences.

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