

Creating an Environment for Pre-Service Teachers to Work with Learners with Special Needs

Jeanne Hager Burth, Ed.D.
University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg

Abstract

In this study, pre-service teachers were afforded the opportunity to participate in two on-campus activities for students with low-incidence disabilities. The project explores the attitudes and perceptions of a group of pre-service teachers before and after participating in two educational experiences with students with low-incidence special needs. An informal educational environment was created on campus to give the pre-service teachers a familiar and casual experience when interacting with learners with cognitive deficits, autism spectrum disorder, physical exceptionalities, and emotional and behavioral disabilities. This study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) Can pre-service teachers' attitudes towards teaching students with disabilities change by providing them with non-academic experiences with persons who have disabilities? (2) Does a familiar setting impact the pre-service teacher's knowledge of teaching persons with exceptionalities when participating in a field experience with persons with low-incidence disabilities?

Creating an Environment for Pre-service Teachers to Work with Learners with Special Needs

Introduction

In addition to coursework and theory, learning to teach consists of spending time in schools observing and interrelating to teachers and students (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009). Wilson, Floden and Ferrini-Mundy (2002) summarized research on teacher preparation and found that "study after study shows that experienced and newly certified teachers see clinical experiences as a powerful component of teacher preparation. Whether the power of field experiences enhances the quality of teacher preparation, however, may depend on the particular experience" (p. 195). Teacher confidence levels in interaction with students with exceptionalities have been shown to increase with training, exposure to specific situations, knowledge, and utilization of interventions. However, there is little evidence that questions whether it is an easier transition for pre-service teachers to interact with the populations of students with special needs in a non-academic, informal experience rather than a formal classroom.

Literature Review

Including all students has new importance given the accountability mandates under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This progression toward inclusive schools has been an impetus for change, not only in curriculum and instruction, but in the roles of programs preparing future teachers. Teacher training institutions have an obligation to ensure that all teacher educators, including pre-service teachers are well-prepared to meet the needs of all students under the guidelines of NCLB and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requirements (Harvey, Yssel, Bauuserman, & Merbler, 2010).

Researchers Blanton, Pugach, and Lani (2011) state that policy-makers are promoting specific roles for higher education institutions in better preparing general education teachers for working with students with disabilities. According to Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Murphy (2012), elements of teacher preparation programs that are evolving as effective, and therefore should be considered, include the following: coursework that blends content knowledge with practical or pedagogical knowledge, pedagogies that promote active engagement, coursework aligned with high-quality field experiences, opportunities for special education and general education pre-service teachers to collaborate, and extended opportunities to learn to teach.

The use of field experiences is considered to be an important mechanism for providing pre-service teachers with opportunities to apply knowledge in real-world teaching situations. Field experiences that were carefully designed to facilitate pre-service teachers' implementation of strategies acquired during their coursework seemed to have the most promise for increasing sense of efficacy, perceptions of competence, planning abilities, knowledge, and classroom performance (Leko, et al., 2012).

Several researchers have examined the effect of providing pre-service teachers with different forms of contact with people with special needs in an educational context. For example, Brownlee and Carrington (2000) sought to answer the following question: Can pre-service teachers' attitudes towards disability change by providing them with sustained contact with a person who has a disability? In this study, students interacted with one teaching assistant with a physical disability over the period of one semester. The students reported that the interaction with the teaching assistant was generally a positive experience for them, provided them with first-hand knowledge of disabilities, and helped them to develop more knowledge about people with disabilities. Furthermore, they believed that more practical experiences with people with disabilities would have helped them in their future career as teachers.

Davis and Layton (2011) also found that pre-service teachers' insights tended to fall into one of two categories: beliefs that students with disabilities would be unable to meaningfully partake in grade level activities and beliefs that students would be unable to conform to behavioral expectations. Participating teachers were equally concerned with the possibility of encountering challenging student behaviors.

Other researchers sought to create a simulated inclusive environment to provide training for pre-service teachers. Bishop and Jones (2002) led a small-scale research project using structured workshop activities with children with profound learning disabilities. The project searched the attitudes and perceptions of a group of pre-service teachers before and after participating in a series of eight workshops. Pre-service teachers planned short activities related to their specialization, and they were encouraged to do this in small groups. Children chose which activities they would like to do using symbols and pictures. The atmosphere in the workshop was very relaxed and supportive with plenty of pre-prepared "backup" activities so students could move the children on if they felt they needed. Pre-service teachers were interviewed before and after these workshops with the analysis indicating that pre-service teachers' attitudes were positively changed toward these children.

It is important to note, however, that mere interaction with students with disabilities may not be the sole factor associated with more promising attitudes. Furthermore, the way the contact is structured seems to have an impact on the change of attitudes. For example, pre-service teachers who participated in structured exchanges with people with disabilities in teacher education programs reported more encouraging attitudes (Brownlee & Carrington, 2000).

Description of Study

This study affords the pre-service teachers the opportunity to participate in two on-campus activities for students with low-incidence disabilities. This research seeks to explore the attitudes and perceptions of a group of pre-service teachers before and after participating in an informal, non-academic educational experience with students with low-incidence special needs. For both activities, a simulated educational environment is created on campus to give the pre-service teachers more familiar and casual experiences when interacting with learners with cognitive deficits, autism spectrum disorder, physical exceptionalities, and emotional and behavioral disabilities.

The projects provide community experiences for students with exceptionalities and afford the pre-service teachers the opportunity to interact with student populations with special needs. The two experiences bring learners from schools for students with exceptionalities to the university campus to participate in activities planned by the pre-service teachers. One activity, called College Day, offers a day on a college campus for students who may never gain the experience of a college education. The second is a dance for students with disabilities, where the college students interact with the students from the schools for autism and emotional and behavioral disorders. Research tells us that all children learn best in natural environments with typically developing peers (Allen & Cowdery, 2011; Brown, Hemmeter, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2005). This interaction with peers of the students with exceptionalities, not only benefits the child with special needs, but also helps individuals who are in teacher preparation programs learn about tolerance and acceptance of others.

Each of the two programs has unique distinctions. College Day provides a day in which the students from Clelian Heights School are invited to spend the day engaged in activities on the university campus. These students are cognitively challenged or have autism spectrum disorder, and therefore they may never fully experience college. College Day is a chance to provide a limited experience for these students with disabilities. The students in the Education Major plan and lead all activities for the day (five hours) under a specific theme, for example Wizard of Oz theme or Pittsburgh sports theme. Activities include hands-on experiences, such as making dioramas of a scene or using maps to identify locations in Pittsburgh. Clelian Heights' students also enjoy lunch in the campus dining facility, so that they may continue the experience of "going to college" for a day. Five informal learning episodes are planned in addition to the lunch experience. The day concludes with a completion ceremony which awards students with a certificate of completion or participation. This concluding activity includes a light snack. See Appendix A for a sample schedule for College Day.

In one particular semester, the theme for College Day was Disney. All learning activities were designed around the theme. For example, in the Computer Lab station, students used particular websites to find information about a Disney movie. One example was the use of the movie *Mulan* raising questions about the character's country of China. The Globe learning station included finding countries or settings, where several Disney movies took place. *Lion King* and *Mulan* were both set in the country of China, where *Aladdin* took place in Arabia and *The Jungle Book* in India. Music was shared from some of the Disney films, and students were able to participate in a sing-a-long. Other stations were used for creating dioramas and tie dying t-shirts with Mickey Mouse ears on the front. Each year the theme changes, and the pre-service teachers plan learning activities around the themes.

Book bags filled with school supplies, trinkets, and small toys are given to all the visiting students with special needs. Items to fill the bags are donated by faculty and staff from the campus. Lunches, certificates, and snacks for the visiting students are paid for by the campus chapter of the Student Pennsylvania State Education Association.

The second program, which meets the goals of providing real-life experiences for exceptional learners, while also providing experiences for pre-service teachers to interact with exceptional learners, is the Autism Dance. The Autism Dance, planned and provided by the students from the Teacher Education Department, is the second activity which offers students with exceptionalities an opportunity to participate in a real-life experience in a secure setting. Although the NHS Autism Schools enroll mostly learners with autism spectrum disorder, there are also students with cognitive deficits, physical disabilities, and emotional and behavioral disorders. The NHS Schools strive to continue to teach the students skills that can assist them to succeed in the community. "The students work on transition and social skills throughout the day, including socially interacting with each other either at the school or in the community," according to Cindy Coulson Head Teacher at the NHS School/Latrobe. The chance to go to a college campus for a social gives students an experience that is outside of their own school, affording the students the opportunity to use the social skills learned at the school.

The Teacher Education Department also provides the students the occasion to attend a fall dance. By interacting with college students who are close to their chronological ages, the students with exceptionalities are given the opportunity to participate in a social activity which mirrors that of their peers, but includes supports needed for the experience to be positive. The dance is held on the university campus, and, in addition to music and dancing, includes sensory activities (for calming or stimulating learners with autism spectrum disorder), Wii interactive games or other electronic games, table games, and snacks. The pre-service teachers plan and conduct the activities for the two-hour dance and interact with the students from the NHS Schools.

When planning and hosting the event, several considerations are always valued. The NHS School contacts the parents of the students with information regarding the details of the dance, such as times for drop off and pick up, as well as location. The NHS Schools also collect emergency contact information and releases for photos. A nurse from the school usually attends, as well as school staff members, who handle any misbehaviors or melt downs. Ideas for activities include dance music, karaoke, line dancing, table games, crafts, corn hole, video games, a photo booth, sensory activities, and snacks. The sensory activities are located in a smaller, adjacent

room to allow students a place to retreat from the music and flurry of activities in the larger room, if needed. Snacks include finger food with healthy choices and salty (sometimes preferred) choices, with few sweet selections. A theme is incorporated, as well. For example, suggested themes have included Decades of the 1900's, Around the World, Wizard of Oz, and the like. Some students dress according to the theme. One theme was Country Western and many attended wearing jeans, flannel shirts, and even some cowboy hats.

Methods

Instrumentation

Mixed methods were used to evaluate the success of the implementation of these two programs. The instrumentation used for the study included pre- and post-surveys, which were completed by the university students. The surveys questioned the participants regarding perceptions and basic knowledge of the exceptionalities and whether the pre-service teachers gained knowledge about working with students with special needs by participating in the programs. Results of the pre- and post- surveys were compared, however, the size of the study did not give enough information for significance, and further studies are needed. The researcher collected demographic information, including gender, age, race, educational program (Early Childhood or Secondary), and prior experiences of interacting with or teaching students with low-incidence disabilities. Further, the surveys questioned the perceptions of the pre-service teachers concerning teaching students with disabilities and their basic knowledge regarding disabilities. The survey was anonymous, so the results of the pre and post surveys were compared aggregately.

The researcher also collected information through the surveys by asking open-ended questions to allow university students to express their thoughts regarding anxieties and concerns about the experiences. The university students described fears and anxieties prior to the experiences of College Day and NHS Autism Dance, such as uncertainties of being able to connect with the students with disabilities, doubts regarding appropriate communication, and reservations about whether the planned activities would meet the needs of the lessons and the students. There were hesitations about how to interact appropriately in a social setting (NHS Dance), with one noting, "I would be more comfortable in a classroom setting where rewards and consequences are part of the routine." Others noted no uncertainties at all.

Qualitative information was also gathered by conducting interviews of small focus groups. This allowed the students to express thoughts and reactions from the programs in a more open-ended manner.

Participants

Eighteen college students, or 100% of the students enrolled in the Exceptional Learners in the Classroom II course, participated in the surveys. Fifteen were female, and twelve of the eighteen students studied Early Childhood Education while six were Secondary Education students. Fifteen of the pre-service teachers were traditional students ranging in age from 17 through 22. Two pre-service teachers were 23 – 25 years old, and one was 26 years old or older at the time of the survey. One sophomore, 14 juniors, and one senior university student participated in the survey. All were Caucasian.

Students reported varying previous experiences in working with students with low-incidence disabilities. Eight students reported that their experiences were drawn from babysitting or volunteer work, while three had family members with disabilities. Three others had familiarity with persons with disabilities from camp or church, and one worked with an individual in a daycare. One noted that he or she had a friend with a disability.

Ten of the pre-service teachers had no formal training in working with individuals with disabilities. Ten of the college students had eleven or more hours of experience observing or working with individuals with disabilities; six claimed six to ten hours; one noted only two hours of experience.

Results

The survey measured the pre-service teachers' confidence levels in teaching students with disabilities. Table 1 shows how the experiences from College Day and the NHS Autism Dance effected the pre-service teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach individuals with disabilities.

The table demonstrates that the pre-service teachers' perceptions changed after participation in the two events. For example, there was a positive change in confidence in the ability to teach students with special needs and the ability to recognize the characteristics of ASD (autism spectrum disorder). The table also exhibits that the pre-service teachers felt more confident in applying various instructional techniques, like using strategies to address the needs of pupils with Autism and using differentiated instruction. The survey showed an increase in confidence in handling misbehaviors. There was still uncertainty to meeting the needs of students with cognitive and physical disabilities.

Table 1

Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of Their Preparedness to Teach– Comparison of Before and After Events

| <u>Questions</u> | <u>Strongly</u> | | <u>Neither</u> | | <u>Strongly</u> |
|---|-----------------|--------------|----------------|----------|-----------------|
| | <u>Agree</u> | <u>Agree</u> | <u>Agree</u> | Disagree | Disagree |
| 1. I am confident in my ability to teach students with special needs. | 0 | 3 | 12 | 3 | 0 |
| Post Activities | 1 | 11 | 4 | 2 | 0 |
| 2. I believe that all children can progress academically. | 9 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Post Activities | 7 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 3. I become anxious when I learn that I will be teaching a pupil with Autism. | 0 | 6 | 12 | 0 | 0 |
| Post Activities | 1 | 3 | 6 | 8 | 0 |
| 4. I have the ability recognize the characteristics of ASD. | 0 | 9 | 9 | 0 | 0 |
| Post Activities | 2 | 12 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| 5. I am aware of strategies to address the needs of pupils with ASD. | 3 | 9 | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| Post Activities | 3 | 12 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 6. I am able to put into practice strategies to develop social skills of pupils with Autism. | 3 | 6 | 9 | 0 | 0 |
| Post Activities | 1 | 14 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 7. I have the ability to put into practice visual strategies to meet the needs of pupils with Autism. | 5 | 0 | 15 | 0 | 0 |
| Post Activities | 2 | 12 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| 8. I would become easily frustrated when teaching a pupil with ASD. | 0 | 0 | 12 | 6 | 0 |
| Post Activities | 1 | 2 | 5 | 8 | 2 |
| 9. I am able to differentiate the curriculum to meet the needs of pupils with cognitive deficits. | 0 | 12 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| Post Activities | 3 | 12 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 10. I have problems teaching a student with cognitive deficits. | 0 | 0 | 15 | 3 | 0 |
| Post Activities | 0 | 4 | 7 | 7 | 0 |
| 11. I know how to adapt and apply curricula (e.g., content standards, social skills, study skills) to meet the needs of students. | 0 | 15 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Post Activities | 1 | 11 | 5 | 1 | 0 |
| 12. I know how to address misbehaviors of students. | 3 | 12 | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| Post Activities | 2 | 14 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 13. I know how to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with physical disabilities, including sensory deficits. | 0 | 15 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Post Activities | 3 | 11 | 4 | 0 | 0 |

The following table (Table 2) represents the perceptions of the students after their experiences. Table 3 gives evidence of confidence in interacting with students with special needs in a formal classroom setting, as well as in an informal setting, and also in recognizing when a student with special needs is becoming frustrated. The table also demonstrates that students are assured in adapting an activity when a student with special needs is not grasping the information or concept.

| <u>Questions</u> | <u>Mean Ranks:</u> | | | | |
|--|---------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| | <u>Generally Prepared</u> | <u>Somewhat Prepared</u> | <u>Not Sure</u> | <u>Somewhat Unprepared</u> | <u>Greatly Unprepared</u> |
| 1. Relating to students with special needs | 11 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2. Teaching academic skills to special needs Students | 3 | 14 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 3. Interacting with students with special needs \in a formal classroom setting | 9 | 8 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| 4. Communicating with students with special Needs | 16 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 5. Managing behavioral problems with students with special needs | 2 | 13 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 6. Recognizing when a student with special needs is becoming frustrated | 8 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 7. Adapting an activity when a student with special needs is not grasping the information or concept | 8 | 8 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 8. Recognizing when to ask for help | 12 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| 9. Interacting with students with special needs in an informal non-academic setting | 12 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Open-ended responses on the survey assisted the researcher in understanding the experiences for the pre-service teachers. The findings are explained here. The setting on the college campus impacted the experience for the university students. Students commented that the comfort level was increased due to being in a familiar setting. Being in a place, in which they were accustomed, made the students more relaxed, one noting, “The setting impacted my experience because it was at a place where I was comfortable, and I was around my friends which helped as well.”

There were differences in the two experiences, in that College Day was more academic and required that the pre-service teachers prepare and deliver a lesson, while the NHS Autism Dance

was more of a relaxed social activity. Students found that College Day gave them more opportunity to explain content and practice teaching. In contrast, the Autism Dance added to their experiences with interacting more informally. Students noted that both experiences contributed to their confidence in teaching and in their preparedness and security levels for interacting with persons with disabilities in future experiences. University students also noted that being able to talk to the students with disabilities and interact with them in small groups was helpful in adding to their comfort levels.

After participating in both events, pre-service teachers were invited to participate in one of two focus groups. Findings from the focus groups reinforced the discoveries of the surveys and allowed the researcher to collect additional qualitative data. In the focus groups, pre-service teachers discussed some of the anxieties that they had prior to the activities, such as interacting with the special needs students and adjusting the instructional levels for the academic activities. One student expressed concern about dealing with misbehavior, saying, "I was nervous thinking about students coming with behavioral issues and maybe throwing a chair out the window or something. If one of them gets frustrated with what is happening, we would need to make sure that we had a sensory room for him." Others questioned, "What are we supposed to do if there is an outburst?" and "What can we do as teachers if they are having trouble or are frustrated?" Another student asked, "What about those who are not vocal or able to tell you what they need? How are we to know or understand that something is happening before it goes too far?"

The following information was also learned from the focus groups. The small groups for College Day gave the university students time to interact on a more individual basis. Since the college students planned an academic activity that was repeated to small groups throughout the day, the range of the levels of abilities was evident. The lessons had to be adapted as some students with disabilities participated with ease, while others struggled. Also noted were the frustrations in dealing with students who were more introverted and did not readily participate in the lessons. One pre-service teacher stated, "We had to increase or decrease the performance levels of the activities without changing the activity." Another student said, "There are going to be varying degrees of ability in my future classroom, and I need to be able to adapt appropriately. This was good practice for teaching me how to reach all of my students. It's just going to require more effort on my part."

Focus group participants noted that the NHS Dance was more informal and interactions were non-academic. One student phrased it beautifully by saying, "It wasn't like a teacher-student relationship. It was like a student-student relationship."

Students gained a better understanding of the spectrum of autism spectrum disorder from both experiences. Some of the students from both visiting schools were identified as having ASD, however some students were more severe. For example, one student rocked back and forth; one repeated everything that was said to him; one listened to music with earphones in the corner of the room; one yelled and tried to leave the building. Other students participated fully in activities with little difficulty. Yet another student surprised all participants by performing songs from Disney movies. He had all the words and motions memorized. One student noted, "I learned that just because a student has autism, it doesn't mean that it is a severe case. I was able to talk to a

few of the students as if they were my friends. Others were not able to pick up on what I was saying. There are different levels and understanding those levels is definitely a key aspect.”

Pre-service teachers confirmed that the setting of the college campus for the two activities helped to alleviate some of their concerns. “It definitely felt better. I felt more comfortable. I’m not territorial, but I am familiar with the setting and knowing where everything is, was a lot easier.” Another stated, “It took a little of the pressure off.” A third student said, “It was more comfortable than going to them and not knowing where things are. We were able to set up our things early and be prepared.” Still another reiterated in saying, “It would be harder to adapt to their school especially not knowing what it looks like ahead of time. It was a lot easier for them to come here.”

Lastly, several students talked about how their thinking changed after participating in the two activities. One understood, “I think the biggest thing that I gained from working with these kids is that I realized that they are people, too. They are not much different than us.” Another specified, “I definitely feel that if I had a student with autism or another disability in my classroom, I could work with him and be comfortable with having him in my classroom someday.”

Conclusion

Through these two ongoing programs (College Day and The NHS Autism Dance), pre-service teachers are given quality professional development opportunities on the college campus, and real-life experiences are provided to the students with exceptionalities. Through both the survey and the focus groups, pre-service teachers confirmed that the familiar setting of the college campus impacted their levels of confidence when participating in a field experience with persons with low-incidence disabilities.

Since the population which was studied was small, further studies are needed to glean more information to support the findings. However, this study has evidence to support that pre-service teachers’ attitudes towards teaching students with disabilities can change by providing them with non-academic experiences with persons who have disabilities. By participating in both activities held on the college campus, pre-service teachers noted that they felt more confident in their abilities to teach students with special needs and in their abilities to recognize the characteristics of ASD. Further, pre-service teachers felt more confident in applying various instructional techniques, planning and using strategies to address the needs of pupils with autism, using visual strategies, handling misbehaviors, and applying differentiated levels of instruction. Students continued to lack confidence in meeting the needs of individuals with cognitive and physical disabilities.

References

- Allen, E., & Cowdery G. (2011). *The exceptional child: Inclusion in early childhood education*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Bishop, A., & Jones, P. (2002). Promoting inclusive practice in primary initial teacher training: Influencing hearts as well as minds. *Support for Learning, 17*, 58-63.

- AACTE and NCLD. (2011). *Preparing general education teachers to improve outcomes for students with disabilities*. Washington, DC and NY: Blanton, L P. Pugach, M. C., & Florian, L.
- Brown, H., & Pretti-Frontczak. (2005). *Blended Practices for Teaching Young Children in Inclusive Settings*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co.
- Brownlee, J., & Carrington, S. (2000). Opportunities for authentic experience and reflection: A teaching program designed to change attitudes towards disability for pre-service teachers. *Support for Learning, 15*, 99-105.
- National Staff Development Council. School Redesign Network at Stanford University. (2009). *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad*. Stanford, CA: Darling-Hammond, L., Chung Wei, R., Andree, A., Richardson, N., & Orphanos, S.
- Davis, R. S., & Layton, C. A. (2011). Collaboration in inclusive education: A case study of teacher perceptions regarding the education of students with disabilities. *National Social Science Journal, 36 (1)*, 31-39.
- Harvey, M. W., Yssel, N., Bauserman, A. D., & Merbler, J. B. (2010). Pre-service teacher preparation for inclusion: An exploration of higher education teacher-training institutions. *Remedial and Special Education, 31(1)* 24-33.
- Leko, M. M., Brownell, M. T., Sindelar, P. T., & Murphy, K (2012). Promoting special education pre-service teacher expertise. *Focus on Exceptional Children, 44(7)*, 1-16.
- The Thomas B. Fordham Institute. (2011). *Shifting trends in special education*. Washington, DC: Scull, J., & Winkler, A. M.
- Wilson, S, Floden R., & Ferrini-Mundy, J. (2002). Teacher preparation Research: An Insider's View from the Outside. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53, (3)*, 190-204.

About the Author

Jeanne Hager Burth, Ed.D. is a dedicated educator and child advocate who has been working in the field of education for 33 years. Currently holding the positions of Assistant Professor and Director of Field Placement and Teacher Certification at University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, she has also served in the roles of Principal, Professor of Educational Studies, Professor of Literacy Studies, Teacher in grades 1, 2, and 3, Learning Support, and Gifted Education. She also serves as the Western PA Director for the PA Multi-region STEM Math and Science Partnership Grant.

Appendix A: Sample Schedule for College Day

| <i>College Day Schedule</i> | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|--------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Theme: Disney</i> | | | | | | |
| 9:00 – 9:15 PLAN FOR EARLY ARRIVAL JUST IN CASE SCENE IT UPSTAIRS OPEN AREA | | | | | | |
| 9:15 – 9:25 Arrival; Get tote bags and schedule; Get into groups with leaders – Upstairs Open Area | | | | | | |
| | Computer Lab | Library Tour (SCENE IT) (pick up group in Computer Lab) | T-Shirts (Patio or Kitchen/Conference Room) | Globes (Downstairs Study Room) | Music (Room 238) | Dioramas (Upstairs Group Study Room) |
| 9:25 – 10:00 | GROUP 1 | GROUP 6 | GROUP 5 | GROUP 4 | GROUP 3 | GROUP 2 |
| 10:00 – 10:35 | GROUP 2 | GROUP 1 | GROUP 6 | GROUP 5 | GROUP 4 | GROUP 3 |
| 10:35 – 11:10 | GROUP 3 | GROUP 2 | GROUP 1 | GROUP 6 | GROUP 5 | GROUP 4 |
| 11:10 – 12:10 | Lunch in the Hempfield Room | | | | | |
| 12:10 - 12:45 | GROUP 4 | GROUP 3 | GROUP 2 | GROUP 1 | GROUP 6 | GROUP 5 |
| 12:45 - 1:20 | GROUP 5 | GROUP 4 | GROUP 3 | GROUP 2 | GROUP 1 | GROUP 6 |
| 1:20 -1:55 | GROUP 6 | GROUP 5 | GROUP 4 | GROUP 3 | GROUP 2 | GROUP 1 |
| 1:55 – 2:15 | Closing ceremony; cake (Upstairs Open Area) | | | | | |

Appendix B: Survey

Survey Introduction

The beginning of the survey included the following introduction:

Greetings Pre-service Teachers!!

You are invited to participate in a research study, which is being conducted to assess the impact of non-academic field experiences with special needs populations. In order to participate, you will be sent two surveys (pre and post) which will gather your perceptions regarding the field experiences with special needs population on our campus. You will also be invited to participate in a focus group in which you will be interviewed as part of a small group after your field experience in order to gather more open-ended responses.

Your responses will be kept anonymous or confidential; at no time will your name be revealed during reporting. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can stop the survey at any time, and you do not have to respond to every item or question. Your academic status will not be affected by your refusal to participate or to withdraw from the study.

Your responses will be combined with the replies from students of several other participating courses. You will not be identified in any way. Your responses will be used to assist me as the researcher in gathering and categorizing pre-service teachers' perspectives relative to non-academic field experiences with special needs populations. Thank you for your participation in this research study.

Survey Questions

Gender of pre-service teacher

Age range of student

Program

Early Childhood

Secondary

Race African American Asian Caucasian Hispanic Native Indian Other, please specify

Experience of interacting with a child with Low-incidence Disability

Previous experience of working with a child with a low-incidence disability

Day-care worker

Family/friend/neighbor with Autism

Babysitting or voluntary work

Camp

Church

Peer Tutoring

Other, please specify

None

I have had previous interactions with a person with a disability.

None

Little (1 – 5 hours)

Some (6 – 10 hours)

Much (16 or more hours)

I have had formal training in working with and/or educating students with disabilities.

No

Yes

My level of experience teaching a student with a disability is

None

Little (1 – 5 hours)

Some (6 – 10 hours)

Much (11 or more hours)

My level of confidence in teaching students with disabilities is

Very Low

Low

Average

High

Very High

College Level

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

Graduate

Perception Questions on Efficacy: (Likert Scale)

I am confident in my ability to teach students with special needs.

I believe that all children can progress academically.

I become anxious when I learn that I will be teaching a pupil with Autism.

I have the ability recognize the characteristics of ASD (autism spectrum disorder).

I am aware of strategies to address the needs of pupils with Autism.

I am able to put into practice strategies to develop social skills of pupils with Autism.

I have the ability to put into practice visual strategies to meet the needs of pupils with Autism.

I would become easily frustrated when teaching a pupil with Autism.

I am able to differentiate the curriculum to meet the needs of pupils with cognitive deficits.

I have problems teaching a student with cognitive deficits.

I know how to adapt and apply curricula (e.g., content standards, social skills, study skills) to meet the needs of students.

I know how to address misbehaviors of students.

I know how to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with physical disabilities, including sensory deficits.

PRE SURVEY ONLY

Indicate your comfort level or preparedness to work with students with special needs according to the following descriptors. Drag and drop item responses into the appropriate category which describes your preparedness.

- | | |
|---|---------------------|
| 1 | Greatly prepared |
| 2 | Somewhat Prepared |
| 3 | Not Sure |
| 4 | Somewhat Unprepared |
| 5 | Greatly Unprepared |

Relating to students with special needs

Teaching academic skills to special needs students

Interacting with students with special needs in a formal classroom setting

Communicating with students with special needs

Managing behavioral problems with students with special needs

Recognizing when a student with special needs is becoming frustrated

Adapting an activity when a student with special needs is not grasping the information or concept

Recognizing when to ask for help

Interacting with students with special needs in an informal non-academic setting

Open Ended Responses:

Explain what fears, uncertainties, or frustrations you have regarding working with students with special needs at College Day?

At the NHS Dance?

What do you hope to learn at College Day and the NHS Dance about working with learners with special needs?

When interacting with learners with special needs would you be more comfortable in an informal, non-academic setting or in a formal, academic classroom? Explain your answer.

POST SURVEY ONLY

Choose how the experiences from College Day and the NHS Dance affected your preparedness to teach students with special needs according to the following descriptors.

- | | |
|---|---------------------|
| 1 | Greatly prepared |
| 2 | Somewhat Prepared |
| 3 | Not Sure |
| 4 | Somewhat Unprepared |
| 5 | Greatly Unprepared |

Relating to students with special needs

Teaching academic skills to special needs students

Interacting with students with special needs in a formal classroom setting

Communicating with students with special needs

Managing behavioral problems with students with special needs

Recognizing when a student with special needs is becoming frustrated

Adapting an activity when a student with special needs is not grasping the information or concept

Recognizing when to ask for help

Interacting with students with special needs in an informal non-academic setting

Open Ended Responses:

Explain one or more experiences during College Day that elevated the level of confidence and knowledge for your ability to teach students with special needs?

Explain one or more experiences during NHS Autism Dance that elevated the level of confidence and knowledge for your ability to teach students with special needs?

Explain how the setting impacted your experience at College Day or the NHS Dance.

Appendix C: Focus Group Prompts

Prompts for Focus Groups

Was College Day/NHS Autism Dance a positive or a negative experience for you? Why? Please provide specific examples, if possible.

Will you provide specific examples of any positive impacts College Day/NHS Autism Dance had on your ability to gain knowledge about working with students with special needs?

Will you provide specific examples of any negative impacts College Day/NHS Autism Dance had on your ability to gain knowledge about working with students with special needs?

Before working with students with special needs at College Day and the NHS Dance, what were your thoughts about your readiness to work with this population?

Prompt further if needed: Explain what fears, uncertainties, or frustrations you had before working with students with special needs at College Day and the NHS Dance.

What, if any, impact did College Day/NHS Autism Dance have for changing the way you felt about working with students with special needs?

What did you hope to learn about working with learners with special needs?

Academically

Socially

What did you actually learn through these two experiences?

What, if any, impact did the setting have on your experience? Did the setting help you or hold you back from learning to work with students with special needs? Give me one or more examples.

Would you have gained more from this field experience if it had been held in a more formal setting, like a school? Why?

What suggestions do you have to make College Day/NHS Autism Dance a more positive experience for your students?