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Kimberly Sutton
York College, Pennsylvania

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Nontraditional Pre-service Teachers: What They Learn from Inclusion Literature

Abstract

Characterized by work, financial, and family demands, nontraditional students are an increasing population in university teacher education programs. Typical teacher education programs include at least one course on the education of students with special needs, and faculty may address perceived weaknesses of the course textbook by supplementing it with "inclusion literature," narratives written by or about individuals with disabilities. Although inclusion literature has been documented to be of value, to date there has been no research that specifically examined the use of inclusion literature with nontraditional pre-service teachers. This qualitative study examined the impact of inclusion literature on a population of nontraditional pre-service teachers enrolled in a required special education survey course as part of their teacher education program. Findings suggest that although nontraditional pre-service teachers interpret inclusion literature differently than do previously examined populations, its use has value and faculty should consider including it as required reading.

Keywords: Nontraditional students; pre-service teachers; inclusion literature; teacher education; special education

Introduction

Adult learners are a rapidly growing population in classrooms across United States college campuses. While the term "adult learner" is often applied to college students older than age 25, research shows that these students might be better classified under the expanded term of "nontraditional" and are impacted by numerous personal factors beyond age including: (a) delayed college enrollment, (b) part-time enrollment, (c) full-time employment, (d) financial independence, (e) financial responsibility for others, (f) family responsibilities, and (g) academic difficulties (Hardin, 2008). In fact, using a definition not limited to age, 73 percent of all undergraduates are nontraditional in some way (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

Although the characteristics that best describe nontraditional students may put them at risk for academic failure, these students bring with them many positive attributes. A survey of more than 400 college instructors found they felt overwhelmingly positive toward nontraditional students in every regard (Melichar, 1994). In addition to their often broader range of life and work experiences, nontraditional students have been identified as (a) self-directed, (b) career-focused, (c) eager, (d) motivated, and (e) more committed to their education than their traditional counterparts (Knowles, 1984, 1992).

The number of nontraditional students has increased in all fields of study in higher education, including that of teacher education (Walsh, Abi-Nader, & Poutiatine, 2005; Eifler & Potthoff, 1998). With diverse backgrounds and increased personal demands, nontraditional students present both "challenges and benefits to teacher educators that are different from those of traditional undergraduate students" (Walsh, et al., 2005, p. 6). Their unique perspective may need consideration when determining appropriate course instruction.

Inclusion Literature

Becoming socialized into a profession is “understanding and adopting the vocabulary and practices of that profession” (Rice, 2005, p. 406). One medium through which the vocabulary and practices of special education is communicated to those new to the profession is through the use of a textbook. An examination of introductory special education textbooks led Rice (2005) to conclude:

The genre... includes: one or two chapters that overview the field and consists of topics such as: history of special education, special education legislation, principles of early legislation, and special education policy. Additional chapters may address the topics of multiculturalism, parents and families, and transition. The remainder of the book is one chapter each devoted to the various disability categories...with high incidence disabilities presented first and then the low incidence disabilities (p. 407).

For instructors tasked with the responsibility of imparting vast amounts of knowledge in a semester’s worth of time, textbooks structured in this way are extremely attractive. Textbooks of this kind, however, do little to provide well-rounded, fully dimensional descriptions of children with special needs and their families, instead relying heavily on the “medical model” which typically “focuses on identifying characteristics of various disabilities and promoting ‘best practices’ for intervention and remediation” (Rice, 2006, p. 251). Morrison and Rude (2002) concluded that textbooks often describe children with special needs “in terms of their negative traits and deficits,” lacking corollary descriptions of strengths and achievements (p.116).

Individuals in the growing field of disability studies, therefore, have advocated for movement away from the use of textbooks that assume that “categorical markers and characteristics of various disabilities are the most salient ways of knowing about student

disability in schools” (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 76) and instead promote an instructional approach that increases understanding of disability by centering on self-narrated stories of disabled persons, often referred to as “inclusion literature.” These narrative accounts make clear the “complexity of disabled experiences” and support teachers by demonstrating the “failure of diagnostic categories to contribute anything meaningful to our interpretations of people’s differences” (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011, p. 273). Researchers have found inclusion literature to be effective in promoting awareness, understanding, and acceptance of those with disabilities, eliminating a “basic anxiety in dealing with the unknown” (Hastings & Graham, 1995, p. 157; Umerlik, 1992; Radencich, 1986; Stroud, 1981; Fein & Ginsberg, 1978; Lava & Lehman, 2007; Hollander, 2002).

Smead (1999) further concludes that inclusion literature can detail the “perspectives of parents, siblings, and other intimates, thereby emphasizing the embeddedness of the exceptional child in a web of ongoing interpersonal interactions” (p. 80). This, in fact, may be one of the most important aspects of inclusion literature, as the family is an essential force in the life of a child, and school systems expend “considerable effort to involve parents in their child’s educational program” (Hollander, 2002, p. 13).

The use of inclusion literature with various pre-service teacher populations has been explored. In their published works, Andrews (1998a; 1998b), Hollander (2002), and Beecher and Darragh (2011) provided rich descriptions of courses or course experiences focused on the use of inclusion literature with pre-service teachers. In a qualitative study, Baglieri (2008) focused on the work of five graduate students enrolled in an “Elementary Inclusive Education” course which relied heavily on inclusion literature to provide information on the “historical, cultural, social, and political aspects of disability experiences” (p. 590). In two separate quantitative studies,

Marlowe and Maycock (1996; 2001) and Marlowe, Maycock, Palmer, and Morrison (1997) used random selection to separate regular education and special education undergraduate pre-service teachers into control and experimental groups, which used textbook and inclusion literature samples, respectively. Results of their studies indicated “literary texts had a positive effect on changing attitudes” toward characteristics of children with special needs (Marlowe & Maycock, 2001, p.78-79). Lava and Lehman’s 2007 qualitative study also documented the positive impacts of inclusion literature. Their course, taken by graduate students seeking certification in special education or taken as an option for students seeking certification as general education teachers, provided “an overview of the social, political, historical, cultural, and educational contexts of disability” (Lava & Lehman, 2007, p. 21). In their analysis of 14 student reports, Lava and Lehman identified themes of inspiration, anger, and empathy, leading them to conclude inclusion literature “proved to be a meaningful filter through which course topics could be more fully understood” (Lava & Lehman, 2007, p.29).

While previous studies have determined the impact of inclusion literature on both undergraduate and graduate-level pre-service teachers to be generally positive (Morrison & Rude, 2002; Beecher & Darragh, 2011; Andrews, 1998; Marlowe & Maycock, 2001; Smead, 1999; Hollander, 2002), no specific research has examined the use of this kind of literature with nontraditional pre-service teachers, whose broader experience base may allow for a different interpretation. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of inclusion literature coursework on nontraditional pre-service regular education teachers.

Method

Participants

This qualitative study examined coursework completed by two different populations of nontraditional pre-service elementary education teachers in a required special education survey course taught by the same instructor over two consecutive semesters. These 36 undergraduate pre-service teachers were enrolled in a university extension program located outside a military installation in the southeastern United States. Through a formal agreement between the local two-year community college and the state-funded university, students can complete their general education credits at the local community college and then transfer those credits directly into the university's teacher education program. The university offers the required courses to complete the teacher education program at various locations: at the community college, on the military base, online, and on the main campus. During the first semester of this study, the class was offered at the community college, while during the second semester the class was offered on the military base.

Seeking to fulfill the state licensure requirements for elementary education (K-6), all pre-service teachers were required to complete one three-credit special education survey course. The course provided future teachers an overview of special education law, as well as information on the characteristics of high and low incidence disabilities and evidence-based strategies for teaching students with diverse learning needs. The course also required a ten-hour field experience, with placement for this fieldwork in a general education classroom with included special education students.

Procedures

In addition to the requisite textbook, study participants were required to choose one first-person narrative from a list of approved inclusion literature provided by the instructor (Appendix A). The books selected by the instructor met two criteria earlier identified in a study done by Marable, Leavitt-Noble, and Grande (2010): (a) each book addressed a specific impact of disability, and (b) each book was a true account written by an individual with a disability or the family member of an individual with a disability. Additionally, each book was available for a reasonable price online and in retail bookstores, and each was read by the course instructor prior to being added to the list of approved inclusion literature.

All the available narratives were showcased at the first class meeting of the semester, and after a brief "book talk" on each by the instructor, students had the opportunity to examine the books for themselves. This allowed each student to select a book based on his or her own interests, needs, or author's writing style. Each student was required to select one narrative to read during the semester.

After reading their chosen book, each student submitted a written analysis which included (a) a general overview of the inclusion literature's plot and focus disability, (b) a discussion of how the narrative's portrayal of the disability aligned with content regarding that disability provided in the course, (c) identification and discussion of any new knowledge gained from the reading of the narrative, and (b) a description of the narrative's perceived impact and any future implications it might have. Student work was submitted electronically to the instructor and graded according to a developed rubric. An electronic copy was retained within the online grading program. At the conclusion of two consecutive semesters, all student work was reprinted

and gathered for analysis in compliance with university institutional research procedures for using retrospective work.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study was collected from a single source: the students' electronic submissions of the required written analysis of their chosen narrative from the approved list of inclusion literature. Because this work was gathered after the conclusion of two consecutive semesters, an examination of student work was completed without the additional influence of in-class discussions or related student comments.

Each student's electronic submission was read and, relying on grounded theory methods, the researcher began with a microanalysis of the data, analyzing the submitted text line-by-line. Using the "concept-indicator model" of open coding described by both Glaser (1978, p. 62-63) and Strauss (1987, p. 25-26), indicators were compared to identify both similarities and variations in the text. Indicators were then grouped together to identify possible concepts. A concept was considered saturated when no additional novel indicators could be identified. The researcher then compared concepts to determine potential categories. Once both concepts and categories were found, the researcher used open coding in which the properties of the concepts were identified and described through comparison with other concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Each electronic submission was first analyzed individually, and then concepts within each were compared to one another to look for commonalities and differences.

Results

Although study participants were provided with a possible 35 narratives to choose from and heard a "book talk" on each, results showed that study participants chose only 12 of the 35

possible narratives from the list of approved inclusion literature (Table 1). Those narratives chosen most frequently addressed Autism Spectrum Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and Traumatic Brain Injury. Books covering these topics totaled 10 out of the 12 narratives selected.

Although a previous study on the impact of inclusion literature identified themes of anger, empathy, and inspiration (Lava & Lehman, 2007), analysis of the coursework completed by the nontraditional pre-service teachers in this study did not align with those same themes. Although 22 out of 36 student work samples had instances of empathy, only one noted anger. Inspiration, a broad theme noted in Lava and Lehman's study, was not noted in the student work examined in this study. Other identified themes included that of a personal connection to the disability and the identification of desired teacher skill sets and strategies.

Empathy

Empathy, the feeling of understanding another person's experiences and emotions, was identified as a theme in 22 of 36 total student work submissions. These nontraditional pre-service teachers spoke at length about how they had developed a new appreciation for what it is like to live with a disability. The following statements obtained from the work submissions demonstrate evidence that reading inclusion literature allowed them to gain a greater understanding of what it is to be disabled:

I couldn't imagine having to do everything in even sets of numbers and have my life consumed by it. I couldn't live a life like this, and I learned to be more empathetic towards people with OCD... I also feel more empathetic towards people with Tourette's because not having control of your body is anything but easy... It really never crossed my mind that people with these types of disorders aren't given a choice. Sometimes the

"normal" people don't think about the hardships people with disorders live with. I guess it is much easier to sit back and criticize these conditions since we don't have to live with it. It is like trying to hide who you are from the world because everyone would think you are weird, strange, or crazy... I believe that by understanding what life could be like for these individuals I will be able to better work with them. I can place myself in their shoes and know there are some things they just cannot help.

A different student wrote:

Reading this book opened my eyes to the struggles that they and their entire families are facing on a daily basis. The book allowed me to see that many different symptoms result from different types of brain injury and that this is not one size fits all.

Students also considered the myriad of ways a disability may impact learning in the classroom and how different their own student experiences may have been:

This book really helps me to understand how different my thought processes could be to someone else... When Temple (author) explains how difficult it was just to understand the difference between a dog and a cat, that was when it hit me how easy this information came to me, and I didn't even realize it... Temple struggled because simply telling her is not enough... Temple had to really work at this one concept. I really can't imagine how much time and frustration she must have gone through to comprehend all she knows today.

Another student, when reflecting after reading a different narrative, wrote:

I have newfound respect for a child with learning disabilities because they go through so much in and outside of the classroom that I never stopped to think about before. They

have to try harder than other students to learn new concepts and they have to do this on a regular basis. It must be exhausting for them, yet everyday they come to school to learn, while some adults would just give up if a task is too hard.

Many of the work submissions of the nontraditional pre-service teachers included comments recognizing the impact of one person's disability on the entire family and the importance of seeing a child within the context of family rather than just the classroom, confirming Smead's (1999) conclusion that inclusion literature emphasizes the role of the individual within the family dynamic. The following samples demonstrate how inclusion literature promoted a developing awareness regarding the ways a diagnosis of disability can affect the family:

I cannot imagine a parent having a child and not being able to hug that child or wrestle with that child without the child having a meltdown. I love playing with my daughter, and we have a ball whenever we are chasing each other and playing tag or whatever we want to do. These parents have to be conscious of ever move they make toward their child.

Another student wrote:

After reading this wonderful book, I had a new found feeling of compassion to [sic] the families that have children with learning disabilities. When I see a child with a learning disability, I see them in the classroom and I see their difficulties with their classwork. I do not stop and think about what they are like at home or how their disability affects their family members. This book has definitely encouraged me to see the child not the learning disability.

One student wrote of her understanding for why parents of children with special needs must be such strong advocates for their children in school:

In reading this novel I understand why it is so important for parents to battle and defend the rights of children with disabilities...I also read from a parent's view the need to include and assist parents in an education plan. Adam's father (author) had a vast knowledge of Adam in areas other than an academic setting...it is obvious that a meeting with family members might have clued teachers in about Adam's limitations and educational needs.

Personal Connection to the Disability

Many of the nontraditional pre-service teachers revealed deeply personal information about themselves and their loved ones with their submitted work. Eleven out of the total 36 student work submissions contained comments connecting the inclusion literature they read to a situation impacting themselves, their significant other, or their child.

This student reflected on her experiences having a sibling with special needs:

My brother was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome at a very young age and from this book I now know that there are other families out there that have had the hardships we have. After reading this book, I have new respect for my mother. I remember as a child my mother would travel to New York City with my brother on numerous weekends. I was so jealous and mad at her at that time because I wanted to go. I now know that those trips were to take my brother to different doctors. She put all of her time and effort into helping my brother and without her doing this, he would never have been at the point he is now.

Another student reflected on her experiences being the parent of a child with special needs:

I learned there are women out there that have experiences some of the things that I have with my son, probably more than I think. My son is always borderline this or borderline that. He never fits well into a specific category. This is the main reason I chose this book...I also saw some of the same insecurities that I myself feel. Did I do something to cause this? How will my son ever function as a man?

This student wrote about being the spouse of an individual with traumatic brain injury and how reading the book had given her hope:

I learned a lot of new information about severe traumatic brain injury. My husband has a moderate care of TBI... I found myself comparing my situation to hers. On one hand, I felt lucky that my husband's TBI was not as severe. He will not have as long of a journey as Alan (book character) had. On the other hand, I looked to her story for inspiration and hope. Cathy (author) handled the situation the best way a spouse can, one day at a time. I often find myself trying to find the light in the situation as she often did. I felt hope because although atypical, her husband recovered quite extensively from the state he was in after the accident. It gave me hope that there would be a happy ending at the end of our journey.

Identification of Desired Teacher Skill Sets and Strategies

The nontraditional pre-service teachers were able to pinpoint effective teacher skill sets or strategies discussed in the inclusion literatures and consider whether they might be important to add to their own teaching repertoires. Some spoke of the importance of really knowing the children in their care as individuals with unique learning needs:

I think it would be really beneficial to find out what type of thinker they are. Are they visual, music, and math, or verbal logic thinkers and how could I use this information to help with my lesson plans to keep them engaged and actively involved.

One student wrote about the importance of capitalizing on success when working with students in the classroom:

As a future teacher, I realize that when dealing with students with special needs, it is extremely important to start with what they already know so that they don't feel like a failure from the start. It is important to always let these kids enjoy much success before starting something new...The key is identifying our children's and students' strengths and weaknesses and working hard with them in becoming the person that they want to be with confidence. As teachers, we need to help our students look past the difficulties with reading and writing and encourage them to feel good about themselves. Look for a child's willingness to learn in other areas. A child needs to feel success and motivation in order to spread his wings.

The vast majority of nontraditional pre-service teachers talked extensively of necessary teacher affective attributes and the socio-emotional climate they would seek for their classrooms. These comments, in 28 out of 36 work submissions, included the following:

I hope that I can provide any children that I have in my classroom a loving and safe environment where they feel accepted and be encouraged to learn and interact with myself and other students. I also want to teach all of my students about disabilities and help them understand the importance of accepting others and being kind to everyone.

I want to work in a school where we care enough about each student that we go out of our way to make them feel comfortable and provide the things they need. As a teacher, I want to strive to know my students' individual needs and be willing to accommodate them. I want to be kind and patient and attentive.

Discussion

Although previously identified themes of anger, empathy, and inspiration (Lava & Lehman, 2007) were found to have some level of applicability, data from this study shows that nontraditional pre-service teachers interpreted the inclusion literature in a manner that better reflects their own experiences as mature adults. An analysis of nontraditional pre-service teachers' work submissions demonstrate these narratives promoted the development of empathy for both the disabled individual and their family. Additionally, two-thirds of the nontraditional pre-service teachers identified important teacher skills and behaviors from reading the inclusion literature, and many connected so strongly with their chosen narrative that they willingly revealed deeply personal information about themselves and their loved ones.

This data indicates that nontraditional pre-service teacher educators benefit when inclusion literature is integrated into special education coursework. However, course professors must consider students' previous experiences and their lives outside the classroom when supplementing instruction with this particular type of narrative. It is essential that course professors understand nontraditional students are likely to interpret inclusion literature in a manner that may be unexpected, if their own teaching experiences have been limited to the instruction of traditional undergraduate pre-service teachers.

It should be noted, however, that this study was based on a very small group of nontraditional pre-service teachers who were enrolled in the same teacher education program in

the same university extension program. Data from nontraditional pre-service teachers enrolled in teacher education programs at other universities may further elaborate on the impact of inclusion literature. Additionally, due to the location of this particularly university program, it may be assumed that a sizable portion of the nontraditional pre-service teachers in this study had personal connections to the United States military, and as a result, their interpretations of the inclusion literature may not align directly with that of other nontraditional pre-service teachers. Further, these nontraditional pre-service teachers may have felt a stronger connection to certain types of inclusion literature offered in the study, possibly explaining why certain narratives were chosen over others. This study also employed qualitative methods that relied heavily on the researcher's ability to find balance between the data and its interpretation. Future studies regarding inclusion literature would be strengthened by the use of additional qualitative and quantitative methods. It is recommended that these limitations be examined through future research.

Conclusion

With the vast majority of children with special needs educated in the regular classroom, pre-service teachers need more than basic knowledge of disability categories and characteristics; they need to develop attitudes of empathy and awareness not likely to be fostered in an introductory special education course centered around a textbook. Heavy reliance on a textbook focusing on the “deceiving ‘neatness’ of disability ‘diagnoses’” (Baglieri, et al., 2011, p. 273) may be “antithetical to inclusive practices in education” (Baglieri, 2008, p. 587).

Advocates in the field of disability studies argue that “teacher education should adopt texts that address student differences in multidimensional, interdisciplinary, personal, and critical

ways” (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012, p. 76). Perhaps the best way to meet such a lofty goal head on in large special education survey courses is through the integration of inclusion literature. These powerful memoirs, which provide critical testimony on both the meaning and experiences of disability, go far beyond what is offered in any textbook and generate an important shift in focus from disability as deficit to a natural part of the human condition.

As increasing numbers of nontraditional students enter teacher education programs and the teaching profession, special education course professors should feel comfortable in the knowledge that although textbooks may not impart all of the information viewed as essential to successful inclusionary practices, inclusion literature can provide the missing link. Additionally, inclusion literature can help address issues related to appropriate socialization into the teaching profession at a time when inclusionary practices are the norm. However, as nontraditional pre-service teacher candidates have a broader range of life experiences and stressors than other populations previously examined, course professors should consider the possible varied interpretations of inclusion literature that this population of learners may have when integrating these narratives into special education content.

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Appendix A

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Table 1

Books Chosen By Study Participants

| Book Title | Disability/Disorder Topic | Number of Times Chosen |
|---|--|------------------------|
| <i>Laughing Allegra</i> | Specific Learning Disability | 3 |
| <i>The Accidental Teacher: Life Lessons from My Silent Son</i> | Autism Spectrum Disorder | 2 |
| <i>The Ride Together: A Brother and Sister's Inclusion literature of Autism in the Family</i> | Autism Spectrum Disorder | 1 |
| <i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time</i> | Autism Spectrum Disorder | 6 |
| <i>Passing for Normal: A Inclusion literature of Compulsion</i> | Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Co-Morbid with Tourette's Syndrome | 6 |
| <i>Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from My Life with Autism</i> | Autism Spectrum Disorder | 2 |
| <i>Over My Head: A Doctor's Own Story of Head Injury from the Inside Looking Out</i> | Traumatic Brain Injury | 2 |
| <i>Cowboy & Wills</i> | Autism Spectrum Disorder | 1 |
| <i>Reading David</i> | Specific Learning Disability | 1 |
| <i>Where is the Mango Princess?</i> | Traumatic Brain Injury | 6 |
| <i>Just Checking: Scenes from the Life of an Obsessive-Compulsive</i> | Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder | 1 |
| <i>A Slant of Sun: One Child's Courage</i> | Autism Spectrum Disorder | 2 |
| <i>The Broken Cord</i> | Fetal Alcohol Syndrome | 1 |
| <i>Count Us In: Growing Up with Down Syndrome</i> | Intellectual Disability | 1 |
| <i>Raising Blaze: Bring Up an Extraordinary Son in an Ordinary World</i> | Specific Learning Disability | 1 |