ENHANCING THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISPOSITIONS IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

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Abstract

As inclusive practices have become more widespread, it is necessary for all educators to have knowledge and skills in the area of special education so that the needs of all students were met in the classrooms. Therefore many universities across the United States added a course about disabilities/special education into their curriculum requirements for all education students. Currently, the University of Akron requires all teacher preparation candidates to complete an introductory course in special education to better prepare them to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities in the classroom.

This article presents a unique approach by including an individual with autism to present to the class his experiences in school. The first hand interactions with this presenter has proven to be among the most effective methods for establishing positive dispositions while dispelling many of the stereotypes, which the university students may have regarding this population.

Cuvinte-cheie: programe de formare iniţială a cadrelor didactice, cerinţe educative speciale, atitudine pozitivă.

Key words: pre-service teacher preparation, special education, positive dispositions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher preparation/training programs in the United States are continually striving to improve coursework and experiences. These programs hope to optimally prepare students for their responsibilities as future teachers. In order to improve teacher preparation, it is essential that university programs are congruent with the current with needs of teachers, students and families/caregivers in the school. One of the most recent and fundamental changes in the United States is the requirement to provide educational services to students with disabilities in the regular education setting to the maximum extent possible. In the United States, this is identified as “inclusion”. Implementing inclusion requires many skills including knowledge of the needs of all students and those appropriate dispositions, which will then allow for optimum collaboration with school professionals and parents. Universities are experienced with dissemination of knowledge and skills; however, it is often more challenging to provide experiences that will enhance appropriate dispositions in the pre-service preparation setting.

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Historically, only those students preparing to work with children/youth with disabilities were required to take courses in special education. This reflected the practices in the school setting in which children/youth with disabilities were often educated in separate classrooms or buildings. Teachers who did not have a background in special education, and taught children who were typically developing, rarely had responsibilities for children with special education needs. Thus, there was no perceived need to provide all teachers with training or experiences in special education at the university training level.

Once inclusive practices became more widespread, it became necessary for all educators to have knowledge and skills in the area of special education so that the needs of all students were met. Therefore many universities across the United States added a course about disabilities/special education into their curriculum requirements for all education students.

Currently, the trend is to require all teacher preparation candidates to complete an introductory course in special education to better prepare them to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities in the classroom. The course which is taught at The University of Akron includes an overview of all disability areas and provides basic ideas for interventions and strategies in special education. The course also contains activities designed to provide first hand experiences with students with disabilities, their parents and current special education teachers. These activities include observations in the school setting and speakers that come into the university class. Among the most effective and poignant speakers are the parents and individuals with disabilities. The opportunity to have first hand interactions has proven to be among the most effective methods for establishing a commitment to fairness and that all students can learn. In addition, this opportunity has resulted in dispelling many of the stereotypes, which the university students may have regarding this population.

During these presentations, the speakers offer a wide variety of experiences they have had in the school and community settings. The presenters are eloquent and offer a perspective that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Both positive and negative experiences are shared and it is very apparent that teachers have a profound impact on the lives and feelings of the students with disabilities and their parents. In addition, the university students/future teachers recognize the speaker as a person with needs and dreams that are similar to their own. They move from thinking in terms of labels such as “autistic” or “mentally retarded” to a real person with a name, educational needs, hopes and dreams.

2. THE PRESENTATION

Within the past several years, this class has had several different individuals present regarding their experiences as a person with disabilities. Individuals with learning disabilities and orthopedic disabilities have been among those who have
shared their experiences. In addition, parents have presented to the class including a parent with a child with serious health impairment. All have been outstanding and contributed a great deal to the class. One specific individual presenting to our teacher preparation candidates is a young man identified as demonstrating autism. Autism is characterized by significant qualitative impairments in social interactions and communication as well as restricted, repetitive and stereotypical patterns of behavior, interests and activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The degrees to which these characteristics are demonstrated vary widely and range from mild to severe (Smith, 2007). Individuals with mild autism and who have relatively good academic, language and intellectual abilities often function well with minimal assistance and supervision. In the United States, these individuals are likely to be included with typically developing peers and potentially later employed in community settings with supervision.

This specific presenter is a young man in his mid-twenties who completed high school in the regular public school setting. He then continued his education by participating in a program that prepares individuals with disabilities for work in the community setting. For the past several years, he has been employed at a large grocery store.

This young man willingly shares his memories of his experiences the school system. He is very eloquent and vividly shares his feelings of helplessness, isolation and rejection. He was bullied by peers and also shares his feelings about his former teachers. He shares that the teachers did not always demonstrate optimum beliefs about the nature of his disability or his educational needs. He is also very honest and acknowledges his own difficulties with demonstration of appropriate and expected behavior. His presentation is balanced and he provides examples of positive experiences with educators who were willing to make accommodations and understand his needs. He is very positive about his current community job and serves as an outstanding example of the capabilities of individuals with disabilities. Lastly, he states that he shares his experiences because he wants to give back and potentially prevent other students with disabilities from having similar experiences.

2.1. BENEFITS FOR THE UNIVERSITY

Institutions preparing teachers are often accredited by The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). NCATE identifies those standards that teacher preparation programs are expected to meet in order to establish and maintain high quality teacher education programs. Included in these standards is an expectation that teacher education programs will establish, teach and measure professional dispositions. According to NCATE (2007), professional dispositions are defined as:
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• professional attitudes
• values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities; these positive behaviors support student learning and development.

Teacher preparation programs can identify a variety of specific dispositions; however, the two professional dispositions that NCATE requires that all institutions teach and assess are “fairness” and the belief that “all students can learn” (NCATE, 2006). Based on their mission and conceptual framework, professional education units can then identify, define, teach and measure additional professional dispositions. In addition to those two dispositions, this presentation has also added to the ability of the university students to value collaboration, communication, trust and respect.

2.2. BENEFITS FOR THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

While this presentation provides the future educators with an understanding of the characteristics and educational needs of students with disabilities, one of the most significant benefits is the development of those positive dispositions expected of future teachers. This is based upon the feedback which the instructors receive on the reflective papers the students submit after the presentation. Many of the teacher preparation candidates have had very few experiences with individuals with disabilities. These experiences may have been positive or negative, but have not occurred in a structured manner so that accurate or firsthand information is shared. Therefore, the students may have been left to draw their own conclusions. At minimum, most of the students begin the class with a perception that there is a significant difference between someone with and someone without a disability. The opportunity to interact with this presenter as a peer allows for the recognition of similarities rather than differences and acknowledgement of abilities rather than disabilities. This presentation is an outstanding method for teaching and assessing dispositions, which are often difficult to teach and measure in a university teacher education program.

All Students Can Learn. The belief that “all children can learn” appears to be very fundamental and almost simplistic; however, this concept is far more complex when applied to children and youth with disabilities. Teacher education candidates must recognize that all students, whether those that demonstrate profound mental retardation or giftedness are capable to learn in the educational setting. In order to learn, students with disabilities must be given opportunities and taught in the settings that will facilitate the most optimum level of generalization. Very often, this is the regular education classroom or the community setting. Social skills learned are best reinforced and generalized in inclusive settings with other typical students (Allen & Cowdery, 2009). In addition, in order to implement appropriate strategies, teachers must refrain from predicting what they believe the student may
be incapable of doing because of the identified label. The above presentation exemplifies the need to address special education students’ needs from a capability framework.

In order to emphasize the College of Education’s commitment to “all students can learn”, we believe that it is critical to listen to the voice and perspective of the person with disabilities and their family members. Very often, they provide critical and essential information that will guide instruction and assessment so that all students truly can learn. Within this presentation, his own needs and adaptations that would support the learning process are shared. For example, he emphasizes the need to retreat in a safe place and “regroup”. Rather than regarding this as an impediment and loss of academic learning time, teacher preparation candidates recognize that this accommodation allows time he needs to refocus on learning so that he “can learn”. This activity and resulting evidence are then very beneficial as a method of demonstrating to The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) that we have a firm commitment to the establishment of this particular disposition, which they have identified as fundamental to teacher education programs.

**Fairness.** Fairness can be measured in terms of equality or equity. According to Adler (1982), equality is interpreted as sameness, implying that all students are entitled to the same education through high school, which includes a standard liberal arts curriculum. While equality in education should and must imply equal access to education and good schools, it should not imply the same curriculum for all individuals (Noddings, 2005). Rather than sameness of curriculum, the curriculum should be tailored to meet the unique needs and interests of the students.

Fairness for children and youth with disabilities goes beyond the above dimension of equality to demonstrate the concept of fairness as equity pedagogy. Here fairness is providing children and youth with disabilities education opportunities, which match instruction to their learning style and needs. This need based definition focuses on the rights of individuals with disabilities to be provided with education opportunities that seek to empower them with the same fundamental rights as everyone else: a quality education (Cartledge, Gardner & Ford, 2009). This presentation elaborates this concept of fairness. Teacher preparation candidates are given the opportunity to focus on the critical need to differentiating instruction and provide the student with disabilities equal access to curriculum as well as settings and opportunities. In addition, the presenter shares experiences in which he felt he was disciplined unfairly and in ways that were not consistent across all students. It becomes critical that teacher education candidates accept the need to thoroughly understand the basis for inappropriate behavior and then intervene in a manner that is consistent and fair to all students.

**Respect.** Beyond the expectations of accreditation, university teacher preparation programs must stress sensitivity to the feelings of the person with disabilities. The power of words cannot be ignored and language used to describe individuals with
disabilities has a tremendous impact on our perceptions of disabilities (Smith, 2007). Respect for children and youth with disabilities was further mandated into law in 1990 when Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990) reauthorized the law to introduce “people first” language. The presenter reinforces this concept repeatedly each time he asks teacher preparation candidates to listen to him and respect him as a human being and not an “autistic” individual. The negative power of words and attitudes towards the presenter significantly impacted his level of self-esteem during the high school years when he was bullied and according to him, the bullying was ignored by the teachers. He notes that ironically, these same teachers would not tolerate inappropriate racial/ethnic comments. In his perception, they did not consider words like “retard” to have the same impact as a derogatory racial comment. It is the hope of the university teacher preparation program that experiences such as these will greatly improve our students’ understanding of diversity.

A further advantage to this presentation is the teacher preparation candidates’ recognition that individuals with disabilities can be and are productive members of society. This presentation persuades teacher preparation candidates to develop a respect for him as an individual who is currently holding a job, and participating as a productive member of society.

Communication, Collaboration and Trust. While not explicit, the presentation emphasizes the responsibility of the teacher to optimally meet the unique needs of all children and individuals with special needs. Implicit is the need to communicate with the student, collaborate with the family, and trust.

Communication is the exchange of a message, not only what is said but how it is said, and what is not said. It can be verbal or nonverbal (Cartledge, Gardner & Ford, 2009). Individuals with disabilities sometimes communicate differently and it is the responsibility of the educator to be competent in recognizing and understanding these differences. Throughout the presentation many of the examples revealed a lack of communication between his teachers and himself during the presenter’s elementary and high school years. As noted above, he was often a victim of bullying and teasing. His teachers rarely gave him an opportunity to express his frustrations, which further exacerbated his negative responses. As the presenter reinforced to teacher candidates: “One person can make a difference. You, the teacher, should take the opportunity to stop others from hurting others”.

Collaboration with family members is also important. When family and educators share information with mutual respect and understanding the learning environment is enhanced (Friend, 2006). Teacher preparation candidates are made aware that collaboration with family members includes talking with, sharing information and respecting opinions and concerns of family members (Salend, 2008). The lack of collaboration with family and school educators was revealed when the presenter’s mother spoke of the number of times he was punished actions that were a result of the disability.
Last but not the least, the presentation emphasizes the need for trust between the student, educator, family and all other professionals involved to create a safe learning environment. Trust develops with consistency, flexibility and intervention over consequences and punishment when appropriate (Allen & Cowdery, 2009).

3. CONCLUSION

The type of presentation we described above has a powerful impact on teacher preparation candidates who overwhelmingly respond positively to it. Feedback not only includes discussions on the social, ethical and legal aspects of students with disabilities in inclusive setting, but more importantly provides teacher preparation candidates with an opportunity to reassess their own perspectives and attitudes for individuals with disabilities. The presenter’s need to share his story so that he can in a “small way be an advocate for other students with disabilities” is compelling. In his own words, “you have the potential to change the way the educational system treats students with disabilities”.

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REFERENCES

REZUMAT

Pe măsură ce programele de educație inclusivă sunt tot mai răspândite, devine necesar ca profesorii să aibă cunoștințe și deprinderi în domeniul educației persoanelor cu cerințe speciale, astfel încât să poată răspunde nevoilor educaționale ale tuturor elevilor prezenți în clasă. Ca urmare, multe universități din Statele Unite au introdus în curriculumul obligatoriu pentru studenții din domeniul științelor educației și cursuri privind educația persoanelor cu dizabilități. În prezent, pentru a asigura o pregătire corespunzătoare studenților care vor lucra cu persoane cu dizabilități la clasă, Universitatea din Akron cere viitoarele cadre didactice să urmeze un curs introductiv în domeniul educației speciale.

Acest articol prezintă o abordare unică în acest sens: o persoană care suferă de autism a fost invitată în fața studenților pentru a le împărți acestea detalii cu privire la experiențele sale din timpul școlarității. Rezultatul obținut după primele interacțiuni cu studenții a dovedit faptul că acest mod de lucru reprezintă o metodă eficientă pentru a dezvolta atitudine pozitivă a studenților și pentru a dizolva modul stereotip de a privi persoanele cu cerințe educative speciale.