Chapter 11
Capacity Building Pedagogy for Diverse Learners

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ABSTRACT

Our phenomenological study of student teachers’ perceptions of special education practices identified a gap in a general education teacher preparation program, given the inclusive model of education mandated through the IDEIA (2004). We offer a 3-tiered teaching framework for teacher preparation programs to utilize capacity building differentiated pedagogy suitable for all learners, including digital learners and students with exceptionalities. The teaching skills for capacity building pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning, and Differentiated Instruction, supported through decades of special education research, will enable the next generation of teachers to effectively serve a diverse population of students (Frey, Andres, McKeeman & Lane, 2012; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2013; Oyler, 2011; Shepherd, Fowler, McCormick, Wilson, & Morgan, 2016).

INTRODUCTION

Differentiated instruction (DI) originated within the field of special education (Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn, & Christensen, 2006) to address the individualized education needs of students as required through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, Public Law 94-172, 1975). The reauthorization of this law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) required DI methodology to move beyond special education practices into general education classrooms. Formerly, learning opportunities for students with exceptionalities were provided in segregated special education classrooms within a regular school environment as an effort to fulfill the least restrictive environment

(LRE) mandate of IDEA (1975). Terminology for this approach was “mainstreaming” or “partial inclusion.” These approaches led students with exceptionalities to lack access to the general education curriculum and were not able to participate fully with their peers in the school community (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson & Hoppey, 2012). Further, with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, standardized assessment practices for school performance were mandated and held schools accountable to ensure students with exceptionalities were making adequate yearly progress within the general education curriculum. In response, school placement trends revealed more students with exceptionalities in general education settings; yet, general educators lacked the training, knowledge, and skills to adequately serve diverse student needs (Oyler, 2011; Grskovic & Trzcnka, 2011; Frey, et al, 2012; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2013).

These legislative acts influence current LRE interpretations that favor full inclusion in the general education classroom (Hwang & Evans, 2011; Pugach, Blanton, & Correa, 2011), however, the extent to which general education teacher programs adequately prepare educators for full inclusion of diverse learners has not yet been fully addressed. Thus, our study directly described student teachers’ experiences with special education practices in general education settings. We sought to investigate student teachers’ ability to accurately reflect on inclusive education practices. Specifically, this study examined student teachers’ responses to prompts to uncover themes of understanding of special education practices as presented in their pre-service program.

BACKGROUND

Theoretical Framework

We used a grounded theory, phenomenological approach to examine the essence of student teacher experiences about special education practices in their placement settings. This process involves studying a small number of subjects to develop patterns and relationships to inform experiential meaning (Patton, 2015). Throughout analysis we were required to set aside our own experiences as prior educators and scholars in the field of general and special education teacher preparation programs to better understand those of the participants in the study. We identified special education terminology within student teacher’s writings and developed common themes across student teachers.

Data was derived from a student teacher seminar taken concurrently with student teaching. The course structure was based upon andragogy. Andragogy, generally defined as the scholarly approach to adult learning (Kapp, 1833) advanced as a theory of adult education (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Andragogy includes five guiding principles: (1) self-concept, (2) adult learner experience, (3) readiness to learn, (4) orientation to learning, and (5) motivation to learn. During this process, an adult learner views him/herself as self-directed while accumulating experiences, skills, and resources for future learning. Key to this process for student teachers is the ability to reflect and connect previous knowledge from course content to meaningful applications in classroom settings. Andragogy, in conjunction with the reflective practice model, has been promoted for adult learners as a means to reinforce experiential learning (Josephsen, 2013). In our study, this method provided a means for student teachers to integrate the five guiding principles of andragogy in a seminar course designed to support reflective practice. Students were required to reflect upon their knowledge learned from specific course content as it related to their student teaching experience.