



Does physical disability affect the construction of professional identity? Narratives of student teachers with physical disabilities[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This article examines the construction of personal-professional identities among student teachers with physical disabilities.
- Based on their life stories, identity formation includes exclusion; a turning point; and professional self-efficacy.
- Student teachers with disabilities can contribute to the school system and teacher training.

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ABSTRACT

This article uses case studies of student teachers with physical disabilities to examine their attitudes toward teaching students with disabilities, and the construction of their professional identity. Narrative analysis of their life stories shows a process of identity formation that begins with a sense of failure and exclusion early in life, continues through a turning point, and concludes with a sense of professional self-efficacy and ability to empower their students, whether with or without disabilities. The article also highlights the unique contribution of student teachers with physical disabilities to their colleagues, teacher-training institutions, and the professional community of educators.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this article is twofold: to explore the views and ideas of student teachers with disabilities regarding the inclusion of disabled students in the school/classroom context, and to address ways in which student teachers with physical disabilities construct their personal-professional identity, as reflected in their life stories. Three such narratives will be studied, involving different physical conditions: a disability of the leg, deafness, and scoliosis. The purpose of the article is to examine the formative experiences of the participants as a result of their physical disability, and how these

experiences shaped their professional identity. The article will also focus on the “added value” of student teachers with disabilities in teacher-training institutions and as future teachers in the school system.

1.1. Literature review

In recent decades, the notion of inclusion has gained increasing momentum, with diversity issues challenging school systems in multicultural societies around the world. To address these concerns, school systems have established various policy guidelines on inclusion of students with diverse needs and abilities that teachers and lecturers are required to implement in their curricula and practices (Crul & Holdaway, 2009; Leeman & Reid, 2006; Ramaekers, 2010; Sang-Hwan, 2011; Vogel & Sharoni, 2009).

Gal, Schreur, and Engel-Yeger (2010) have identified child-based factors (i.e., physical, cognitive, or emotional limitations) as well as environmental factors (attitudinal, architectural, administrative, and programmatic) that can challenge the success of inclusion. These elements are reflected in every aspect of teaching (goals,

[☆] There is a lot to be learned from investigations of how students experience school that could be used to inform policy and practice. For instance, a study that used life history to explore the inclusion in mainstream schools of students with various kinds of special need could yield information that other approaches would not provide: information that could help individual schools, parents and teachers plan and work more effectively in this area and information that could inform local and national policy.

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learning materials, didactics, and assessment), and form part of the inclusion policy known as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which has been implemented in several countries (Spencer, 2011). But despite government mandates (in the U.S., for example) to educate students in the least restrictive environment, teachers continue to have mixed feelings about their own preparedness to educate students with disabilities in a general education setting (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012). It has been found that implementing inclusion with (physically and otherwise) “different” students is dependent on teachers’ professional identity as shaped by their life experiences (Woodcock, 2013) and formed through their narratives about themselves (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Teachers’ professional identity has been described as “standing at the core of the teaching profession” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 178), a framework through which they develop their self-perceptions, values, attitudes, practices, educational approaches and discourse. As such, the narratives that emerge from their experiences of inclusion or exclusion (or of disability) have a decisive effect on their perceptions and practices with regard to inclusion of students with differences or disabilities. For example, teachers who have experienced exclusion of any kind as members of a minority group, or those from first- or second-generation immigrant families, are more willing to teach children from different cultures and display greater empathy and commitment toward them (Crul & Holdaway, 2009). Further, they tend to encourage greater involvement in learning and to adopt multicultural educational methods in their classrooms when minority students come from an ethnic background similar to their own (Leeman & Reid, 2006). Similarly, teachers who have experienced exclusion as a result of physical difference show empathy, sensitivity, and a desire to embrace the needs of children with physical and/or learning disabilities. They feel capable of integrating them socially, emotionally, and scholastically (Burns & Bell, 2010; Gal, Schreur, & Engel-Yeger, 2010; Vogel & Sharoni, 2009). Likewise, teachers who have visual impairments, as compared with those who do not, feel that they possess unique strategies and methods that can help teach students with visual impairments while also seeing themselves as role models who can empower their students (Lewis, Corn, Erin, & Holbrook, 2003).

The attitude of “normative” teachers without physical disabilities to special-needs students is also influenced by the teachers’ past encounters with significant figures with special needs. In their 2010 study, Gal, Schreur, and Engel-Yeger found three categories of such figures: (a) children with disabilities in their immediate environment during their formative years, (b) friends with disabilities, and (c) family members with disabilities. Teachers who had known children with disabilities in close proximity showed mixed attitudes: on the one hand, they indicated less worry about their health and their perceived tendency to “give up” than did teachers who had had no close contact with such children; yet on the other, they stated that children with disabilities were less successful than “typical” children. Teachers who had friends with disabilities in their immediate environment showed a significantly more positive attitude than those without such friends. However, teachers with family members with disabilities in close proximity did not differ significantly in their attitudes from those who did not have disabled family members, though the former group expressed greater awareness of the need for accommodation of children with disabilities.

According to Block & Obrusnikova (2007), attitudinal barriers are at the root of all environmental obstacles, and are the most difficult to change. These are reflected in misconceptions, stereotypes, stigmatization, fear of the unknown, resistance, lack of clarity regarding the rights and opportunities of the disabled, and isolation of children with disabilities.

With respect to teachers’ attitudes to difference, they reported more positive feelings toward students with social or physical limitations than those who were academically or behaviorally challenged. More specifically, teachers were more receptive to including students with sensory and physical impairments than those with other disabilities (Woodcock, 2013).

At the same time, it was found that students with disabilities are perceived much less favorably by longtime teachers who are without disabilities themselves. Such students make them uncomfortable, and are seen as slow, loud, and less outgoing, but also as vulnerable individuals who require protection, warmth, and concern (Gal et al., 2010; Hutzler, 2003). Everhart (2009) found that many student teachers in the U.S. have little or no experience in working with students with special needs, and as a result feel inadequately prepared for their future classrooms. This limited exposure and preparation increases their anxiety and fear of students with disabilities. Woodcock and Vialle (2011) also cite lack of experience as one of the reasons for negative opinions toward learning-disabled students among student teachers in elementary schools in Australia, with a tendency to see such students as lacking academic competence in comparison with “normative” students. Such attitudes are even more pronounced among student teachers in secondary schools (Woodcock, 2013). But as shown by Taylor and Ringlaben (2012), student teachers who have been trained to work with “different” students develop a more positive attitude to inclusion and are more likely to adjust their teaching and curriculum to meet the individual needs of their students. They also attest that they have the skills, professional confidence, and knowledge to work with special-needs students. The narratives of student teachers in a course on teaching in multicultural classrooms similarly demonstrate the tools they have acquired to adapt their teaching to the diverse needs of their students as well as their ability to create an atmosphere in the classroom that respects differences (Kang & Hyatt, 2010).

Nonetheless, it was found that positive attitudes toward students in diverse classrooms are contingent on their physical or cognitive limitations not holding back the progress of the other students. Student teachers noted the scholastic, social, and personal benefits of inclusion along with their fears of disciplinary problems and difficulties adapting the curriculum (Kodish, Kulinna, Martin, Pangrazi, & Darst, 2006; Konza, 2008; Martin & Kudláček, 2010; Nonis & Jernice, 2011; Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008).

To summarize, the literature indicates that perceptions of teachers and student teachers regarding students with disabilities are influenced by several factors: their own experiences of inclusion or exclusion, and those of people close to them; ideologies, stereotypes, and social constructs regarding difference; and the quality of the diversity education they receive. Yet despite the abundant research in this area, few studies have been conducted on attitudes toward difference among student teachers who themselves have physical disabilities. The purpose of the present study is to expand the professional knowledge in the field of diversity education, in particular regarding student teachers who themselves have physical disabilities, by exploring their attitudes on inclusion of students with disabilities, and examining the ways in which student teachers with physical limitations construct their professional identity with respect to inclusion of disabled students. The teachers’ personal experiences of exclusion in childhood are highlighted, along with critical turning points in their lives.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research method

This study employs a narrative inquiry approach based on three

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