Connecting the dots: An exploration of how pre-service special education teachers make sense of disability and diversity

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Aligning coursework and fieldwork deepens understanding of course concepts.
- Combined experiences influence strengths-based view of disability and diversity.
- Experience provides foundation for culturally/linguistically responsive practice.
- Opportunities for reflection promote self-awareness and introspection.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Although teacher education standards address preparing candidates to serve diverse learners, minimal guidance is available concerning specific program components and their influence on candidates' growth and development. Through constant comparative analysis of end-of-semester reflections, this exploratory, qualitative study investigated preservice special educators' developing perceptions about disability and cultural and linguistic diversity following field experiences aligned with courses. Participants reported a growing awareness of themselves, students they encountered, and the intersectionality between diversity and disability. Further, their insights reflected recognition of the combined influence of coursework, fieldwork, and opportunities for supported reflection. Implications for research and program development are offered.

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1. Introduction

Demographic changes have dramatically increased the heterogeneity of student populations in many countries (Allard & Santoro, 2006; Bridges et al., 2016) and teacher education programs around the world have recognized the importance of preparing candidates to effectively serve students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) communities (Ball, 2009; Bleicher, 2011). In many western societies, including the US, there exists a growing divide between the pool of predominantly white, monolingual, middle-class teachers and the diverse students they serve (Chang, Anagnostopoulos, & Omae, 2011; Conner, 2010). Teaching standards increasingly reflect a focus on preparation for student diversity; vis., those of the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (2013) in the United States, the Teachers' Standards from the Department of Education in the United Kingdom (Gov.uk, 2011), and the Australian Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2017).

Preparation programs in special education are frequently aligned with the standards established by the International Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2012) which also echo an increasing emphasis on diversity (Pae, Whitaker, & Gentry, 2012).

While numerous programs have identified the need to ensure that candidates have the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to appropriately serve exceptional learners from CLD communities, little research is available regarding the inclusion of multicultural content (Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008; Waitoller, 2014); available evidence indicates that special educators lack confidence in serving such learners (Chu & García, 2014). Programs typically offer stand-alone or add-on multicultural courses that are cited as being insufficient (Baran, 2014; McDonald, 2005) and are often disconnected from field experiences (Coleman, 2012). To date, limited guidance is available concerning specific preparation components and their influence on candidates' growth and development.

2. Key components of Multicultural Special Education teacher preparation

Effective service delivery requires future special educators to

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understand the influence of language and culture on the delivery and outcomes of programs and services (Robertson, García, McFarland, & Rieth, 2012). Developing this understanding requires a program focus on:

- the nature of culture and cultural variability (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012);
- the sociocultural context of the teaching/learning process (Hollins, 2008; Lareau, 2003; Rogoff, 2003);
- the importance of culturally and linguistically relevant (CLR) teaching in preventing academic and behavioral difficulties (Gay, 2010; Hollins, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010);
- implementation of CLR practice in all special education processes including early intervention, referral, assessment, and individualized education plan (IEP) development (García & Ortiz, 2008; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Orosco & O'Connor, 2014); and
- collaboration with family members and colleagues to appropriately serve all students, including those with disabilities (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010; Ortiz, Robertson, Wilkinson, Liu, & McGhee, 2011; Rueda & Monzo, 2002).

Exposing students to these key concepts and developing the necessary skills and dispositions (as specified by CEC; see Table 1) entails providing preservice special educators with opportunities to explore the intersectionality between disability and other aspects of diversity (García & Ortiz, 2013). Specifically, "intersectionality makes possible the examination of the *simultaneous interactions* among race, class, gender, and (dis)ability for any individual child, family and community, as well as the *interplay* between these individual or group characteristics and *organizational responses* to them" (italics in original; García & Ortiz, 2013, p. 34). Carefully aligned coursework and fieldwork coupled with opportunities to engage in supported reflections (Seidl & Pugach, 2009; Zeichner, 2010) have the potential to foster a framework from which to design and implement CLR special education.

2.1. Situating disability in a cultural context

Special educators must understand how individuals experience their disability as members of their respective cultural, social, and linguistic communities. Pugach and Seidl (1998) noted that disability is frequently described as a diversity equivalent to racial, ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic diversities. Considering disability "in an absence of the full consideration of the socioculture within which it exists, is to fail to understand the dynamics of an individual's education or community experience—the full context of their lives" (Pugch, 2001, p. 447). Instead, exposure to the concept of intersectionality has the potential to lay a strong foundation as new educators form their own professional identities (Puig & Recchia, 2012).

2.2. Alignment of coursework and field experience

Field experiences play an important role in the development of culturally responsive educators and it is important that preservice teachers (PSTs) engage in the field as early in their preparation as possible (Miller & Mikulec, 2014, pp. 18—24). Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, and Murphy (2012) explained that the combination of coursework with active learning opportunities has the potential to change general and special education teachers' understanding of disability and cultural and linguistic diversity. Further, they describe the effectiveness of carefully designed and intensive field experiences aligned with high quality coursework. Zeichner (2010) argues that the structuring of such experiences requires a careful consideration of the intent of the coursework and the fieldwork respectively, coupled with effective mentoring, to more successfully prepare candidates to enact complex teaching practices.

2.3. Supported reflection

In addition to developing an understanding of CLR practice through coursework and fieldwork, PSTs need supported

Table 1
International Council for Exceptional Children Standards for Multicultural Competence.

Category	Standard
Assessment	Administer nonbiased formal and informal assessments.
	Use assessment information in making eligibility, program, and placement decisions for individuals with exceptional learning needs, including those from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds.
Beliefs/Historical Perspectives	Issues in definition and identification of individuals with exceptional learning needs, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Historical points of view and contribution of culturally diverse groups.
	Impact of the dominant culture on shaping schools and the individuals who study and work in them.
	Variations in beliefs, traditions, and values across and within cultures and their effects on relationships among individuals with exceptional learning needs, family, and schooling. Strategies used by diverse populations to cope with a legacy of former and continuing racism. Personal cultural biases and differences that affect one's teaching.
	Communicate effectively with families of individuals with exceptional learning needs from diverse backgrounds.
	Ways of behaving and communicating among cultures that can lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding.
	Demonstrate sensitivity for the culture, language, religion, gender, disability, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation of individuals.
English as a Second Language	Use communication strategies and resources to facilitate understanding of subject matter for students whose primary language is not the dominant language.
Home and School	Cultural perspectives influencing the relationships among families, schools, and communities as related to instruction.
	Characteristics and effects of the cultural and environmental milieu of the individual with exceptional learning needs and the family. Potential impact of differences in values, languages, and customs that can exist between the home and school.
Instruction	Strategies to prepare individuals to live harmoniously and productively in a culturally diverse world.
	Develop and select instructional content, resources, and strategies that respond to cultural, linguistic, and gender differences.
	Impact of learners' academic and social abilities, attitudes, interests, and values on instruction and career development.
	Prepare individuals to exhibit self-enhancing behavior in response to societal attitudes and actions.
Learning Differences	Differing ways of learning of individuals with exceptional learning needs including those from culturally diverse backgrounds and strategies for addressing these differences.
	Teacher attitudes and behaviors that influence behavior of individuals with exceptional learning needs.
	Effects of cultural and linguistic differences on growth and development. Characteristics of one's own culture and use of language and the ways in which these can differ from other cultures and uses of languages.
Learning Environments	Create a safe, equitable, positive, and supportive learning environment in which diversities are valued.
	Organize, develop, and sustain learning environments that support positive intra- cultural and intercultural experiences.
	Ways to create learning environments that allow individuals to retain and appreciate their own and each other's respective language and cultural heritage. Ways specific cultures are negatively stereotyped.
	Mediate controversial intercultural issues among students within the learning environment in ways that enhance any culture, group, or person.