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Abstract

This mixed methods study explored how the inclusion of literature on Autism Spectrum (AS) in a teacher education diversity class impacted students' knowledge and perceptions of AS. Data from the intervention group found a positive shift in student perceptions of AS through the reading process. Includes a discussion of suggestions implicit in the findings and of potential future research.

There is a substantial need for teacher educators (TE) to better prepare pre-service teachers (PST) with an understanding of Autism Spectrum (AS) since increasing numbers of children are being identified as on the AS (CDC, n.d.). Legal obligations require schools to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment and to the greatest extent with peers with and without disabilities, thus those students identified as on the AS often receive educational services in regular education classrooms within inclusive settings (Autism Society, n.d.). Many general education teachers are not prepared to effectively instruct students with disabilities in inclusive settings (Blecker & Boakes, 2010; McCarty, 2006), or may be anxious about students with disabilities (Rizzo & Kirkendall, 1995; Theodorakis, Bagiatis, & Goudas, 1995; Zanadrea & Rizzo, 1998). Effective instruction for individuals identified as on the AS in inclusive settings requires qualified teachers equipped with the skills and attitudes necessary for efficient instructional strategies in order to educate students identified as on the AS in their classrooms. The purpose of this study was to explore approaches with which TE may use to increasing (PST) understanding of AS.

Perspective

The study was grounded in the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (1978), who suggested that learning is inherently social because learning and meaning-making occurs

through interactions with others. The social and authentic tasks of reading fictional literature and participating in verbal discussion enable PST to engage in the construction of meaning around teaching as they develop new perceptions of students on the AS.

Significance

The findings from this study are of significant interest to TE as they share how literature can be employed in teacher education programs to enhance PST understanding of AS. This paper shares research that expands knowledge of pre-service teachers, particularly in how learning about AS through engagement with literacy practices changes PST perceptions of AS. It deepens knowledge of the power and promise of literature to increase PST- understanding of students on the AS.

The Research Questions of the Study

This study extends the research to an undergraduate teacher education diversity course with the aim to answer the following research questions:

1. *Were there differences in changes in perceptions of AS between a class section that did not read adolescent literature with a protagonist who was on the AS and a class section that read adolescent literature with a protagonist who was on the AS?*

2. If there were differences found in student perceptions between those students who read adolescent literature with a protagonist who was on the AS and those students who did not read adolescent literature with a protagonist who was on the AS, what were those different perceptions?

Setting & Participants

This study was conducted at a mid-sized Master's level state university in the rural Southeast US that is very diverse in terms of race/ethnicity (with no majority ethnic population on campus), religion, and age, as exemplified by a mix of traditional college age and non-traditional college age students. Classes in Teacher Education followed the demographic profile of the university as a whole, with no ethnic group predominating as a majority group in the classes included in this study.

The course where the study was conducted followed the larger pattern of diversity seen in Teacher Education at the university. The course population was very diverse in race/ethnicity, religion, and age (traditional/non-traditional students). The gender ratio of each class was similar, with roughly a three female to one male ratio. The majors included Special Education, Elementary Education, Secondary Education, Physical Education, and Music education, with the majors distribution similar in both classes. The comparison group was slightly older, with seven non-traditional students, while the intervention group was slightly younger, with three non-tradition students. There were twenty-seven (27) in the comparison group and there were twenty-three (23) students in the intervention group. One student in the comparison group was working on a post-baccalaureate certification leading to initial teacher licensure; the other twenty-six (26) students in the comparison group were working on attaining a bachelor's level degree and initial licensure. All of the students in the intervention group were working on a bachelor's level degree and initial licensure. The course was a required three (3) semester hour credit sophomore level course in diversity in the university's Teacher Education program,

which leads to teacher licensure. The study included two class sections of the same course. One section met during the day, meeting twice a week. The other one met at night, meeting once a week.

Intervention Procedure

The intervention group and the comparison group received instruction using the same course text and class activities, taught by the same instructor, during the same semester. Students participated in the same in class activities, which included individual, pair, small group, and whole class groupings in both groups. The intervention group also had "book clubs" centered on discussions on one of the two books each student chose to read.

The participants in the intervention group chose to read one of two selections: *Wild Orchid* (Brenna, 2005) or *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon, 2004). Both books have protagonists who are arguably on the AS. Seven (7) participants choose to read *Wild Orchid* while thirteen (13) participants choose to read *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Participants began reading books after the first administration of a survey and concurrently with the beginning of the class unit on AS.

Data Collection Procedures

The survey used with both the comparison and intervention groups came from the earlier work by Stone and Rosenbaum (1988). The instrument (Appendix) explores participant views of AS and was used with permission of Wendy Stone, Ph.D. The survey had twenty-two (22) items using a Likert-type six point scale.

Administration of the survey occurred in the two groups both before the teaching of the unit that included coverage of AS and after the unit that included the AS was taught. Both groups were administered the survey during the same weeks both before and after the AS unit. Administration was also after the intervention

group finished reading and discussing the two books.

In addition to the quantitative data collected from the before and after administrations of the survey, participants also responded to two “Ticket out the door” (TOTD) class activities during the unit. The same TOTD prompt was used with both groups: “What was the most important thing you learned in class today?” This prompt was administered twice for both the comparison group and the intervention group at the same places in the unit for both groups.

Data Analysis

The investigator analyzed the quantitative data collected using the survey using SPSS to compare changes in attitudes between before and after administrations of the survey, and between comparison and intervention groups. Only data from student participants who completed both the before and after survey administrations were included in quantitative data analysis. Survey response data from twenty-two of twenty-seven (22/27) participants were included in Comparison group quantitative data. Survey response data from twenty of twenty-three (20/23) student participants were included in Intervention group quantitative data. Students in both the Comparison and Intervention groups wrote in “Don’t know” or similar or left blank in numerous cases on both the pre and post administrations.

The investigator analyzed the qualitative data from the TOTD to explore the perceptions of the student PST participants of AS using Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These themes were coded into categories. Another qualified peer also separately coded these TOTD themes. Results were compared to identify common theme categories. For a student’s responses to be included in the qualitative data analysis, a student had to respond to both administrations of the TOTD.

Findings

Research Question One: *Were there differences in changes in perceptions of AS between a class section that did not read adolescent literature with a protagonist who was on the AS and a class section that read adolescent literature with a protagonist who was on the AS?*

There was a difference in the change in PST participant knowledge between the comparison and intervention groups as seen in the quantitative data collected by the survey. This was reflected in increased number of items answered on the survey by the intervention group compared to the comparison group in the after administration of the survey.

In the before administration of the survey, 92 of 484 participant item responses of comparison group were “Don’t know” or similar or left blank compared with 60 of 440 participant item responses of intervention group which were “Don’t know” or similar or left blank.

In the after administration of the survey, 88 of 484 participant item responses of the comparison group were “Don’t know” or similar or left blank, whereas 40 of 440 participant item responses of intervention group which were “Don’t know” or similar or left blank. This is reflected in tabular for in the following Table “A”.

Table A

Group	Items with “Don’t Know” or left blank		% Change
	Before	After	
Comparison	92/484	88/484	-4%
Intervention	60/440	40/440	-33%

Research Question Two: *If there were differences found in student perceptions between those students who read adolescent literature*

with a protagonist who was on the AS and those students who did not read adolescent literature with a protagonist who was on the AS, what were those different perceptions?

The qualitative data collected through the TODD noted differences in the changes in participant perceptions between the comparison and intervention groups that the quantitative data collected by the survey did not. There was a change in the *perceptions* by the comparison group which centered more on an increased **awareness** of Autism and how it might impact the teaching done by these pre-service teachers. Likewise, there was a change in the *perceptions* by the intervention group which was **affective** and centered on increased **understanding** of what it was like for a person to experience AS as part of her life.

Of the comparison group, 18%, or five (5), of the participants mentioned that they gained different perceptions about Autism when responding to the TODD prompt of *“What was the most important thing you learned in class today?”* The comments clustered around the theme of not realizing the prevalence of AS. One participant noted that “I learned that there are more autistic kids all the time.” Another indicated that as a teacher there was a likelihood of having a student with AS in their classes: “I may have autism in my class.” A comment made by a number of the participants was similar to this one, which indicates a growing awareness of the participants about the nature of the causes of AS: “No one knows where autism comes from.” The other 82 %, or twenty-two (22) of the comparison group responses to the TODD did not reference AS.

Of the intervention group, 75%, or seventeen (17), of the participants mentioned gaining different affective perceptions about AS when responding to TODD prompt of *“What was the most important thing you learned in class today?”* Comments clustered around the theme of not realizing what it was like to live with AS as part of one’s life. Only 25%, or six (6), of intervention group participants did not mention AS in the TODD.

Comments indicating this shift in perception included this powerful insight into what living with AS might be like: “I did not know how it was with all the stimulation and how that would make everything so hard.” Increased empathy was reflected in comments such as “No one seemed to understand his needs very well most times.” One of the most insightful and empathetic comments was this one “I felt like she did when she was first at the lake. Does this mean I am autistic?” this referenced when the protagonist in *Wild Orchid* (Brenna, 2005) had been relocated to a different locale against her choice by the protagonist’s mother, and how this dislocation affected the protagonist.

The comments noted above are indicative of a shift in the intervention group participants’ affective understanding of AS.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest several implications to improve teacher education so that PST are better prepared to meet the needs of increasing numbers of students on the AS.

First, it suggests that classes that make use of books and book clubs may increase student perceptions of AS issues when used with textbook and class activities compared to classes that use textbook and class activities alone. This is seen in the thirty-three percent (33%) decrease in “Don’t know” or similar responses in the intervention group between before and after administrations of the survey compared to the four percent (4%) decrease seen in the comparison group of such responses.

Second, the study suggests that reading books and the concomitant use of book clubs in classes may more positively change student perceptions of AS in terms of participant PST affect when used with textbook and class activities compared to classes which utilize textbook and class activities alone. While it is important that we as TE must strive to help students in their gaining understanding on an intellectual level, this study suggests that attending to the affective side of learning is

crucial in helping PST make the shift in perspective, both intellectually and emotionally, needed to work with students on the AS, and likely other disabilities as well.

Future steps needed in this line of research are: 1) Further investigation is needed to explore methods of influencing the affective changes needed to help fully educate pre-service teachers for today's diverse classrooms, 2) Refine survey to accommodate "don't know" replies more effectively, 3) Refine questions to capture participant knowledge concerning Autism better, 4) Expand sample sizes in order to make findings more generalizable.

The need for TE to prepare PST to effectively teach in classrooms with diverse student populations has never been clearer. Recent work exploring PST dispositions (Shippen, Crites, Houchins, Ramsey & Simon, 2005) suggests affective changes are as important as intellectual ones. The incorporation of literature by TE to positively make these affective shifts with PST may be one route to preparing more effective teachers capable of creating inclusive classrooms.

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teacher adaptations, using literature to enhance learning, and how pre-service and in-service teachers construct, modify, and implement visions of being a teacher. **Dr. Williams** can be contacted at jbwilliams@email.wcu.edu

Appendix

For each of the following statements, choose the number that best reflects how much you AGREE with the statement. Write the appropriate number on the line following each statement. Use the following scale:

Use the following scale:

1 for Fully Agree, 2 for Mostly Agree

3 for Somewhat Agree, 4 for Somewhat

Disagree, 5 for Mostly Disagree, 6 for Fully

Disagree

1. Autism is an emotional disorder. _____

2. Autism exists only in childhood.

3. Even with the early intervention, the prognosis for independent community functioning of autistic individuals is poor.

4. Autistic children are “untestable”.

5. Autism can occur in mild as well as extreme forms. _____

6. Autistic children are more intelligent than scores from appropriate tests indicate.

7. It is difficult to distinguish between autism and childhood schizophrenia. _____

8. Autism is a communication disorder.

9. Autistic children do not show social attachments, even to parents. _____

10. Autistic children usually grow up to be schizophrenic adults. _____

11. Most autistic children are also mentally retarded. _____

12. Most autistic children do not talk.

13. Autistic children are deliberately negativistic and noncompliant. _____

14. It is important that autistic children receive Special Education services at school. _____

15. Autism occurs more commonly among higher socioeconomic and educational levels. _____

16. Autism is a developmental disorder.

17. Autistic children’s withdrawal is mostly due to cold, rejecting parents. _____

18. Most autistic children have special talents or abilities. _____

19. Emotional factors play a major role in the etiology of autism. _____

20. With proper treatment, most autistic children eventually “outgrow” autism. _____

21. I feel comfortable identifying a child as autistic. _____

22. Autistic children do not show affectionate behavior. _____

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