

Teacher Candidate Reflections and Perceptions on a Service-Learning Project Working with Children with Disabilities on a Family Island in the Bahamas

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Abstract:

Over 4 years, 16 undergraduate special education teacher candidates from a university in the northeastern United States participated in a service-learning project on a family island of the Bahamas. An "out island" or "family island" refers to one of the islands in the Bahamas other than New Providence (where Nassau is the capital) or Grand Bahama. These islands are sparsely populated and remote, requiring either ferry or plane ride to access them.

The special education teacher candidates spent a week to 10 days supporting children with disabilities including intellectual disabilities, autism, emotional and behavioral disorders, and various learning disabilities. The teacher candidates developed lesson plans and implemented them both in small groups and individually. While on the island, the teacher candidates were responsible for reflecting on their experiences in the context of their preparation program in nightly journal prompts. From the journal entries of these 16 candidates, themes have been identified. These relate to teacher preparation that might optimally support sustainable educational change and progress for educators seeking to enhance education services for students with disabilities on a family island in the Bahamas.

Key Words:

Special education, individualized instruction, transition services, journal writing, service learning, Family Islands, cultural immersion.

Introduction

Service learning, field experience, practica, and student teaching constitute the cornerstone of an effective teacher education program. These application-based settings shape teacher candidates into future teachers. Teachers who employ culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms demonstrate greater student learning outcomes (Alfaro, Bryan, & Spargue, 1997; Gay, 2002; Novak, Murray & Scheuermann, 2009). Cultural diversity exists in almost any classroom today. As with students, no two classrooms are alike, and no two classrooms have the same composition of cultural diversity.

Ensuring culturally diverse experiences is critical for optimally preparing undergraduate teacher candidates to teach in culturally diverse settings. However, the characteristics of a culturally diverse experience are highly debatable. Numerous factors influence diversity, including socioeconomic differences, language, education, age, gender, religious/spiritual views, and sexual orientation.

Traditionally, teacher candidates from suburban higher education institutions in the northeastern United States travel to urban field placements to fulfill the cultural diversity component of their teacher preparation program. Although these experiences certainly provide teacher candidates with exposure to many aspects of cultural diversity, candidates do not typically encounter other elements of cultural diversity such as nationality, health beliefs/practices, language, acculturation, beliefs about disability, and educational frameworks (Alfaro, 2008; Johnson & Battalio, 2008; Mahon, 2007; Marx & Moss, 2011).

Simple exposure to culturally diverse settings is inadequate for enhancing the context in which a future teacher will develop curricula and deliver instruction (Bryan & Sprague, 1997); Power, Truong, & Grey, 2017). Rather, reflecting on culturally diverse experiences through the lens of content learned in a teacher preparation program is critical to enhancing a potential teacher's ability to teach in a culturally responsive manner (Gay, 2002; Mwebi & Brigham, 2009; Novak et al., 2009; Fry, Hale, Bower, Jaffari & Soll, 2017). Through this lens of program content, the participants of this study were encouraged to reflect on our international service-learning project (Merryfield, Jarchow, & Pickert, 1997; Mwebi & Brigham, 2009; Larsen & Searle, 2017). This paper reports the findings of an intensive weeklong service-learning project involving teacher education undergraduate students, from a suburban university in the northeastern United States, in an international, culturally diverse educational setting. The teacher candidates chronicled their experiences through journaling, and the authors reviewed the journals for common themes relating to the content of current teacher preparation programs.

Method

This study was conducted over a 4-year period and involved undergraduate teacher candidates enrolled in a special education degree program at a university in the northeastern United States. The candidates were training to become teachers of children with disabilities and were in either their third or fourth year of study when this research was conducted. Annually, during the study period, four undergraduate students participated in a minimum weeklong service-learning project working with

children with disabilities on a Family Island in the Bahamas. The screening process for participation in the project required that the undergraduates complete an application form and be interviewed by the two university professors conducting the research. Upon acceptance to the program, teacher candidates endeavored mini-fundraising campaigns to garner resources to donate to schools on the island. Over 4 years, 16 teacher candidates participated: 11 female and 5 male. The teacher candidates were enrolled in special education teacher preparation programs for teaching certification in prekindergarten through 12th grade, prekindergarten through 8th grade, and 7th grade through 12th grade, with a secondary content certification. Each teacher candidate had completed courses including Introduction to Special Education, Behavior Management, Curriculum and Instruction I, and Assessment for Special Education prior to participating in the service-learning project. Each teacher candidate had completed prior community service work and had engaged in service learning within the continental United States. The teacher candidates had no prior knowledge or experience with any international education systems.

The project was conducted in March of each year during the university spring break; participation required that the undergraduates not miss any other university classes. During each week-to-10-day visit, the teacher candidates were required to keep a journal in which they responded to prompts given by the faculty that addressed the various experiences that they were either having or anticipated having in the family island schools. The following prompts were provided:

1. After your first day in the school, what are your thoughts? How did it go? How were you received? What surprised you the most?
2. After spending a day in [school] (name withheld), what are your impressions? Again, what surprised you? What does the school need most?
3. How does this specialized school differ from those you have observed in the United States?
4. What are the strengths of the school system that you have seen? What are its biggest challenges?
5. If you could bring one change to the schooling on the island for children with special needs, what would it be?

Each school day of the project, the teacher candidates and two university faculty members worked in schools and classrooms that supported children with various disabilities. The teacher candidates initially observed various schoolteachers and students and then assumed the teaching responsibilities for either small groups or individual instruction. The teacher candidates had developed generic lesson plans prior to arriving on the island, and they modified their plans for use in the classroom throughout the project. In addition, the teacher candidates conducted lessons and informal assessments, and they worked with teachers to develop individualized goals for each student.

At the conclusion of the fourth year of the project, investigators analyzed the teacher candidates' journals for patterns, similarities, and differences in their reported experiences and perceptions. From the teacher candidate journals of the 16

undergraduate special education teacher candidate participants, several themes were identified that might serve to support educational change for educators seeking to enhance education services for children with disabilities on a Family Island in the Bahamas.

Findings

This research investigated special education teacher candidate perceptions and their reflections on supporting children with disabilities on a Family Island in the Bahamas. In addition to the research findings that indicate the need for more global experiences in teacher preparation programs (e.g., because of unfamiliarity with the Bahamian education system), this paper will also focus on five themes that emerged among the participants. These themes may help to support ongoing educational changes as educators continue to envision future special education services for children with disabilities on the Family Islands in the Bahamas. As identified in the context of the journal reflections of the teacher candidates, the following themes emerged:

- Staffing and staff training
- Individualized education
- Transition planning and training
- Eagerness to learn
- Effects of positive reinforcement and positive behavior supports

Staffing and Staff Training

A predominant theme that quickly became evident through analyzing the journal entries was the need for more staff support as well as ongoing staff training in the school on the Family Island to support children with disabilities more effectively. After spending a week in the schools, one of the undergraduates commented as follows:

If I had to narrow the list down to two things that the school and the students need most it would have to be more help and training for the teacher. There is such an array of needs that all of the students have at the school that it would be almost impossible for just one teacher to meet all of the needs of the students. With another teacher in the building they would be able to work on the more specific needs of each student, and increase the quality of education that each student was getting. With more training for the teacher in areas like classroom management and positive behavior support plans he would be able to increase his instructional time with the students instead of attending to problem behaviours.

One teacher candidate noted that:

In order for progress to be achieved, there needs to be more accountability for results in student achievement, which would require more faculty, scientifically-based instruction woven into a structured curriculum, and daily/weekly/monthly/yearly assessment. I'm sure everyone involved understands this, though they understand there is no money to achieve basic goals.

In the special school on the island there are no extra supports for the students. The most help he (the teacher) gets is missionaries coming in and teaching Bible studies and fixing the school up.

When given a journal prompt that asked what one change they would bring to the island schools for children with disabilities, one teacher candidate responded as follows:

If I could bring one change to the island for students with special needs it would be better training for their teachers. In the primary schools, it seems the teachers need to learn to accommodate students with special needs or those who may be struggling. With better training the teacher at the special school would be better able to prepare his students for life on the island and perhaps be able to better prepare some of his students with less severe needs back into the general education classroom.

Another participant addressed the need for more staffing support:

If I could change one thing about the schooling on the island for children with special needs it would be to add more support staff in the room. The teacher is not able to meet all of the students' needs with only one aide in the room. Due to the students' varying ages and skill levels, whole group instruction is not an effective strategy, yet the teacher does not have many options. Some, if not most, students would be given a personal care assistant in a classroom in the United States. With more help from support staff the teacher would be able to work one-on-one with a student and/or break the group up into homogenous groups for instruction.

With one extra set of hands, the amount of progress the students could make would be unimaginable. All of the best supplies in the world can't make up for a pair of hands and a heart. They have two sets but could use at least two more.

One teacher candidate related the success they were able to have after only a few days of working in small groups or one-on-one with children with disabilities:

I learned that the students need consistency! As the week progressed and the students worked with the same familiar faces each day, we were able to complete more and more activities throughout our short academic time. The students also need some one-on-one attention, which is almost impossible to get since the teacher to student ratio is 1:11. Some of the students need more help than the others.

Individualized Education

A follow-up subtheme to the need for more staffing and support services that became increasingly apparent was the overarching need for individualized education for children with disabilities in the schools.

One teacher candidate noted:

It is clear that the students in the school are definitely in need of much more individualized education than they are receiving. This would also ensure that the students who are more advanced have the opportunity to progress in their

education, while other, lower-functioning students [sic] are given the opportunity for additional practice and thus progression as well.

The need for this individualized instruction was also described in the following way:

Some of the students clearly had more needs than others. The aspect of the school that I found most surprising was that students with such a wide array of needs were all grouped together. Some of the students would probably be served in life skills classes in the United States, while others may have needed learning support services. The range of students' ages was also incredible. Students who are five years old are in the same group as students who are fifteen years old. Looking at the school as a whole and at each individual student's needs, one could make a laundry list of needs that would be pages long.

One of the teacher candidates explained why the children needed more individualized instruction:

I would love for the students to have more individualized education. It was extremely frustrating to watch the students and work with students who were 5 or 6 years apart and had very different needs. If the students were to receive individualized instruction, they would succeed at a much higher rate.

Another teacher candidate stated the following:

Any type of individualized instruction is exactly what the students at the special school need. With such a range of ages and abilities in the school, the students are simply not receiving an appropriate education. While some students are challenged beyond their capacity, others spend the majority of their class time waiting for the rest of the class to catch up. Additionally, the lower-functioning students in the school spend most of their time drawing and coloring which does little to nothing for them educationally.

After only a week of individualized instruction, I was able to see obvious progress in both of the students with whom I worked. One student that I worked with could count to 12 independently when I arrived, and through working with him figuring out his personality, he was able to count to 20 independently on our last day at the school. This student also refused to speak to me upon arrival, speaking only a few words when he finally would ask me to leave him alone, and by the end of the trip he was asking me to spend my time with him and telling me full thought-out stories about his family and life at home. It is clear that when he is not receiving individualized instruction he remains shy and quiet, but by interacting with him consistently and gaining his trust, he became comfortable enough to open up and work hard with me.

Given all of the limitations present in the schools on the island, many of the teacher candidates demonstrated an understanding that the teachers were doing all that they could with limited resources to help the students. One teacher candidate reflected:

I think what surprises me most is how diverse the needs of the classroom are. I'm continually impressed with the helper and the teacher and what they do for

the students. I get the impression that they recognize the need there is for these students and that need is what keeps them fighting to find a way.

Positive Behavior Support

An instructional theme that was repeatedly identified was the need for positive behavior support in the classrooms. All of the undergraduate students who participated in the 4-year study had, within the previous year, taken a course in behavior management at their university, and both of the professors conducting the project were instructors of that course. This may explain why this theme emerged so consistently and why the undergraduates so readily identified it. As one of the teacher candidates noted:

It seems like there are several students who would benefit from one-to-one instruction and/or a behaviour plan. It seems like it would be nearly impossible to implement with only two adults to 11 students. I'd say the needs involve: support staff, behaviour intervention strategies, behaviour plans and instructional resources.

One teacher candidate noted the difference in the disciplinary policy implemented in the schools compared to how they had been trained at their university:

Another item that caught me off guard was the system of discipline in place. It did not consist of positive reinforcement, rather it was a system of intimidation. The part that surprised me was how well it seemed to work in his classroom.

One teacher candidate reported on his or her own use of positive reinforcement at a school on the island and the efficacy of such practice:

The students really calmed down on the second day and we were able to take control and have the students see us as authority figures and not just visitors. Also another reason their behaviour changed was the positive reinforcement. It was amazing to see how fast positive reinforcement changed the students' behaviour. I was so surprised how fast the students started to exhibit more desirable behaviours. The students were so willing to do work so that they could then play with the cameras for 1 minute. The tiny things that I would never think to use as reinforcement like a camera worked so well with these students because they do not have a lot of experience with the cameras.

The overarching need for positive behavior support was noted as follows:

I think that something the students need is more positive reinforcement and praise. This would help to reduce the undesirable behaviours and increase instructional potential.

Transition Planning and Services

The theme that emerged from the journal entries that has the most potential for concrete application is the need for transition services for children with disabilities on a Family Island; simply, what will they do after they leave school at the age of 16? Teacher candidates voiced concern after learning that students would not receive schooling or transition planning once reaching the age of 16.

I was kind of surprised to hear that the students did not do anything after 16 when they left school. I wish they learned more life skills in order to be active in

the community. It's hard to know, these students will not be doing anything after 16.

When asked to propose a change they would make for the children with disabilities in the island schools, one teacher candidate reported as follows:

I believe the students at the special school would really benefit from life skills training. Many of them would do well working in the community at the bakery, grocery store, library or fish fry. These students are capable of doing these jobs. I wish that these students had more opportunities.

It's pretty sad when you think about how D. will be done school at the end of the year (as he is 16). He really can't work so it's sad to think about what he's going to be doing (probably sitting at home watching TV).

Another teacher candidate stated the following:

If I could bring one change to the school it would be teaching them more life skills. The students are capable of learning and maintaining a job. The students could use more assistance in learning to take care of themselves and repeating daily living activities. The students would benefit from learning to cook, make their bed, do laundry, use money, pay bills/check out at the store, groom themselves and personal presentation.

Students with special needs benefit from life skills training because it is not always taught at home. Some of these students may be able to live on their own one day.

While acknowledging that the United States and the Bahamas vary drastically in lifestyles and opportunities, particularly on a Family Island, one teacher candidate noted with regard to transitioning to post school life:

Life down there is vastly different than up in the States. The ability to multiply and divide may be less necessary over a functional skill they need to live in society. I am a big proponent of functional skills education, especially if these individuals lose their services at the age of 16. So I would focus more on functional skills based education. I do not know what that would look like because we only spent a week down there. My focus is always quality of life outside of school. More trips into the community can be a start. Applying skills when buying items. Learning how to walk the streets safely. Learning to swim like we did on Tuesday. These are all functional skills that will help them in life. The government won't support these individuals after 16 like the government supports individuals in the States until 21. I believe we have to educate them for their future living and working skills.

The importance of having a plan in place for these students so that they may someday be productive citizens of the Bahamas was emphasized in one of the participant's journals:

I would love to see transition plans implemented. We knew that many of the students will be graduating soon and there are no plans for when they graduate. If the students were to have a transition plan implemented, they would be successful for the rest of their lives and live a fulfilling life as well.

If I could bring one change to the schooling on the island for students with special needs, it would have to be the development of programs to prepare and place students in positions to contribute as active members of Bahamian society upon their graduation. It is demoralizing to see the capabilities of some of these students, only to think that their abilities will be viewed rather as disabilities once they turn 16.

Transition planning and life-skill instruction is lacking at the school as well. There are not many opportunities available for the students after they have graduated. Thus there is not much to be done to prepare them for post-school life. If more community supports were available to the students, they would work on life skill curriculum in order to be productive citizens after they graduate.

Eagerness to Learn

The final theme that emerged from the journal entries, and one that most positively distinguishes this project from others that the teacher candidates had undertaken working with children with disabilities in the United States, was that of the eagerness of the Bahamian children to learn. The teacher candidates were repeatedly struck by the fact that all of the children with whom they came into contact were excited and willing to be taught. These experiences greatly differed from those that they had in schools near their home university. One of the journal excerpts addressed this as follows:

Some of the students were a little shy, but most of them eagerly welcomed us and could not wait to start working with us. I was really surprised not only by the students' willingness to interact with us, but by how much they wanted to impress us as well. While the students definitely wanted to play and have fun, many of them immediately wanted to do schoolwork with us too; several students immediately grabbed books and spent their free time reading with us happily. I was really impressed with the students' morning meeting: they sang the national anthem, collectively said a prayer asking for success in school that day, and each student stood up and introduced themselves to us. Although I was unable to fully gauge the students' academic levels, I was impressed with their manners and their behaviour during the meeting; they clearly understood the teachers' expectations of them.

The students were very excited to meet us and engage in activities with us, so we decided to let them release some of their energy by playing outside and getting to know the students on a personal level. By doing this, I was able to see how the students interacted with each other, whether or not they participated in activities, or if they clung to the newly acquainted adults rather than peers.

The teacher candidates identified the eagerness of the children to learn as a major strength of the education system and of the island culture as a whole. One teacher candidate articulated this concept as follows:

The biggest strength that I have seen in the school, and coincidentally the biggest strength that I have seen on the entire island, is the sense of community that everyone shares. It is extremely refreshing to see how all of the students are truly their brother's (or sister's) keeper, and that they all progress and learn as a unified front. This communal attitude that the students have adopted surely

stems from the communal attitude that permeates throughout the Bahamian culture.

If I had to pick the biggest strength of the school system in the Bahamas, I would have to say it is the eagerness of their students. All of the students at the schools on the island seemed to be excited to learn and to be at school.

The strengths of the school system that I have seen are that they have pretty good attendance and the students are well mannered.

Conclusions

Of the five themes identified in the reflective journaling of the study participants, three have been identified by the Bahamas Ministry of Education in its 10 Year Education Plan (2009). In the plan, Goal 4 of the Vision and Mission of the Ministry of Education parcels out Objectives 6, 7, and 13 for planning the transition of special education students, increasing the number of trained special education-related service personnel, and providing ongoing training for teachers and teachers' aides, respectively. Additionally, the Report of the (Bahamian) National Commission on Special Education places future emphasis on inclusion, early identification and intervention, and expanded and improved infrastructure for special schools and schools serving special education students.

As we endeavor to utilize the observations of the teacher candidates toward envisioning the future of special education services on the Family Islands of the Bahamas, we may consider the future use of positive behavior supports and increased individualized instruction. However, proper focus on such educational concepts will not be possible until personnel who are more qualified can implement the findings of this research.

The 16 special education undergraduate teacher candidates who participated in this cultural immersion project reported that it was a life-changing experience. Many of the teacher candidates had not spent any time outside the United States before and had never flown. Each teacher candidate had experienced classroom placements in schools for children with disabilities close to their university and was familiar with supporting students with disabilities in evidence-based ways that are consistent with their teacher preparation program. The conclusions of this research on the journal writing patterns and themes of the undergraduate teacher candidates are presented to inform considerations for the future of special education on a Family Island in the Bahamas. There are limitations to this research that may be evident to the reader. The teacher candidates had little to no knowledge and understanding of the Bahamian education system and reported their observations according to their experiences in the United States. This clearly led to bias in their judgment; however, their insights remain valuable because they serve as building blocks in a vision toward enhanced services for children with disabilities on a Family Island.

Another limitation is the short amount of time that each group spent on the island. A week to 10 days is not sufficiently long for teacher candidates to grasp a full understanding of a school and its system. However, again, it serves to provide a rationale for improving services and support for many who cannot address the detriments of their school system themselves.

Although it is evident that comparing the Bahamian School System and the U.S. School System is almost impossible, this is the only frame of reference that the teacher candidates had, and the comments were shared with that limitation in mind. In the future, the researchers hope to support the schools on the island in their efforts to enhance the support for individuals with disabilities by instituting longer periods of service by teacher candidates, collaborating with national higher education authorities, and providing faculty and staff training, as requested.

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Children with disabilities are one of the most marginalized and excluded groups in society. Facing daily discrimination in the form of negative attitudes, lack of adequate policies and legislation, they are effectively barred from realizing their rights to healthcare, education, and even survival. Estimates suggest that there are at least 93 million children with disabilities in the world, but numbers could be much higher. They are often likely to be among the poorest members of the population. They are less likely to attend school, access medical services, or have their voices heard in society. Their disabilities also place them at a higher risk of physical abuse, and often exclude them from receiving proper nutrition or humanitarian assistance in emergencies. On the level of individual families, households with higher incomes can afford better health care for pay and additional educational opportunities through private teachers, tutors, and professionals. On a preschool level, it was mainly represented by special preschools or special groups in regular preschools for children with speech impairments (Table 1). I Table 1 Institutions for Children with Disabilities on Preschool Level Types of institutions/group Number of schools For speech impairments For tubercular intoxication For visual impairments For physical disabilities For mental disabilities For hearing disabilities Other profiles Total. Separate statistics on children with severe disabilities show that there were 554, 867