

Stuck Spaces as Moments of Learning: Uncovering Threshold Concepts in Teacher Candidate Experiences of Teaching in Inclusive Classrooms

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Abstract : There is no doubt that classrooms of today are more complex and diverse than ever before. Preparing teacher candidates to meet these challenges is essential to ensure the retention of teachers within the profession and to ensure that graduates begin their teaching careers with the knowledge and understanding of how to effectively meet the diversity of students they will encounter. Creating inclusive classrooms requires teachers to have a repertoire of effective instructional skills and strategies. Teachers must also have the mindset to embrace diversity and value the uniqueness of individual students in their care. This qualitative study analyzed teacher candidates' experiences as they completed a fourteen-week teaching practicum while simultaneously completing a university course focused on inclusive pedagogy. The research investigated the challenges and successes teacher candidates had in navigating the translation of theory related to inclusive pedagogy into their teaching practice. Applying threshold concept theory as a framework, the research explored the troublesome concepts, liminal spaces, and transformative experiences as connected to inclusive practices. Threshold concept theory suggests that within all disciplinary fields, there exists particular threshold concepts that serve as gateways or portals into previously inaccessible ways of thinking and practicing. It is in these liminal spaces that conceptual shifts in thinking and understanding and deep learning can occur. The threshold concept framework provided a lens to examine teacher candidate struggles and successes with the inclusive education course content and the application of this content to their practicum experiences. A qualitative research approach was used, which included analyzing twenty-nine course reflective journals and six follow up one-to-one semi structured interviews. The journals and interview transcripts were coded and themed using NVivo software. Threshold concept theory was then applied to the data to uncover the liminal or stuck spaces of learning and the ways in which the teacher candidates navigated those challenging places of teaching. The research also sought to uncover potential transformative shifts in teacher candidate understanding as connected to teaching in an inclusive classroom. The findings suggested that teacher candidates experienced difficulties when they did not feel they had the knowledge, skill, or time to meet the needs of the students in the way they envisioned they should. To navigate the frustration of this thwarted vision, they relied on present and previous course content and experiences, collaborative work with other teacher candidates and their mentor teachers, and a proactive approach to planning for students. Transformational shifts were most evident in their ability to reframe their perceptions of children from a deficit or disability lens to a strength-based belief in the potential of students. It was evident that through their course work and practicum experiences, their beliefs regarding struggling students shifted as they saw the value of embracing neurodiversity, the importance of relationships, and planning for and teaching through a strength-based approach. Research findings have implications for teacher education programs and for understanding threshold concepts theory as connected to practice-based learning experiences.

Keywords : inclusion, inclusive education, liminal space, teacher education, threshold concepts, troublesome knowledge

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