

Embracing the Uniqueness and Potential of Each Child: Moving Theory to Practice

Authors : Joy Chadwick

Abstract : This Study of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research focused on the experiences of teacher candidates involved in an inclusive education methods course within a four-year direct entry Bachelor of Education program. The placement of this course within the final fourteen-week practicum semester is designed to facilitate deeper theory-practice connections between effective inclusive pedagogical knowledge and the real life of classroom teaching. The course focuses on supporting teacher candidates to understand that effective instruction within an inclusive classroom context must be intentional, responsive, and relational. Diversity is situated not as exceptional but rather as expected. This interpretive qualitative study involved the analysis of twenty-nine teacher candidate reflective journals and six individual teacher candidate semi-structured interviews. The journal entries were completed at the start of the semester and at the end of the semester with the intent of having teacher candidates reflect on their beliefs of what it means to be an effective inclusive educator and how the course and practicum experiences impacted their understanding and approaches to teaching in inclusive classrooms. The semi-structured interviews provided further depth and context to the journal data. The journals and interview transcripts were coded and themed using NVivo software. The findings suggest that instructional frameworks such as universal design for learning (UDL), differentiated instruction (DI), response to intervention (RTI), social emotional learning (SEL), and self-regulation supported teacher candidate's abilities to meet the needs of their students more effectively. Course content that focused on specific exceptionalities also supported teacher candidates to be proactive rather than reactive when responding to student learning challenges. Teacher candidates also articulated the importance of reframing their perspective about students in challenging moments and that seeing the individual worth of each child was integral to their approach to teaching. A persisting question for teacher educators exists as to what pedagogical knowledge and understanding is most relevant in supporting future teachers to be effective at planning for and embracing the diversity of student needs within classrooms today. This research directs us to consider the critical importance of addressing personal attributes and mindsets of teacher candidates regarding children as well as considering instructional frameworks when designing coursework. Further, the alignment of an inclusive education course during a teaching practicum allows for an iterative approach to learning. The practical application of course concepts while teaching in a practicum allows for a deeper understanding of instructional frameworks, thus enhancing the confidence of teacher candidates. Research findings have implications for teacher education programs as connected to inclusive education methods courses, practicum experiences, and overall teacher education program design.

Keywords : inclusion, inclusive education, pre-service teacher education, practicum experiences, teacher education

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