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Inclusive Education: Adapting the Learning Partnerships Model for Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

Inclusion is an integral part of the public school system and has a significant impact on classroom teachers. As a result, the majority of teacher education programs are intentional in incorporating inclusive education within their curricula. Research has shown that inclusion coursework does increase preservice teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusion, but it does not increase feelings of preparedness to serve in an inclusive classroom. To address such concerns, this action research presents an intensive inclusion project that was structured around the Learning Partnerships Model, created by Baxter-Magolda & King (2004), to increase the development of self-authorship. The components of the Learning Partnerships Model have been adapted and implemented to create an inclusion project that was applied in an introduction to exceptionalities course. The paper discusses the project's conceptual framework, the associated components, provides student learning outcomes, and presents future implications.

There has been a robust amount of research which indicates that taking an introductory special education course has a positive impact on preservice teachers' attitudes towards inclusion (Garriott, Snyder, & Miller, 2007; McHatton & Parker, 2013; McHatton & McCray, 2007; Shade & Stewart, 2001; Sze, 2009). However, the research also shows that possessing a positive attitude does not necessarily translate into preservice teachers feeling prepared to teach in inclusive settings. While preservice teachers may feel strongly about the benefits of an inclusive setting, the lack of preparedness can induce feelings of fear or stress (Costello & Boyle, 2013; Garriott, Snyder, & Miller, 2007; Jobling & Moni, 2004; Rojewski & Pollard, 1993; Shippen, Crites, Houchins, Ramsey, & Simon, 2005). Forlin and Chambers (2011) found that intentional instruction about inclusion increases preservice teachers' knowledge and confidence, but it also increases their stress levels when it comes to teaching students with disabilities. These findings support the need to investigate ways that teacher education instructors can deliver important knowledge about inclusion while instilling confidence in preservice teachers.

Extant research indicates that there is a need for teacher education programs to create teachers who are better equipped to serve in inclusive settings (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Garriott, Snyder, & Miller, 2007). Additional research in this area is justified because as of 2012, 80% of students who receive special education services are served in an inclusion classroom (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). This demonstrates the urgency for preservice teachers not only to possess a positive attitude towards inclusion, but also to feel prepared to teach in an inclusive setting because having a positive attitude cannot make up for inadequate preparation (Burton & Pace, 2009). Therefore, there is a need for teacher educators to explore pedagogical strategies that foster areas of professional growth, such as inclusion. Preservice teachers need to begin building their knowledge about inclusion early in the course work so they have ample time to strengthen their feelings of preparedness to teach in an inclusive setting.

This action research presents an instructional tool that effectively builds preservice teachers' knowledge about inclusion while counteracting their perceived lack of preparation through learning activities that foster the development of self-authorship. This tool was developed through a series of assignments, titled the "inclusion project" which is a student-centered project based around the Learning Partnerships Model (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2004) which promotes the development of self-authorship. The manuscript will be organized in the following way. The conceptual framework will first be presented followed by the associated components of the project. Subsequently, the results of

the qualitative analysis will be reviewed and pedagogical implications will be discussed.

Conceptual Framework

The inspirational focus of the project was rooted in Baxter-Magolda and King's (2004) *Learning Partnerships: Theories and Models of Practice to Educate for Self-Authorship,* which addresses how to help university students develop the qualities of self-authorship. Self-authorship is defined as "the capacity to internally define a coherent belief system and identity that coordinates engagement in mutual relations with the larger world" (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2004, p. xxii). The characteristics of self-authorship (i.e., collaboration, considering multiple perspectives, critical analysis/evaluation, valuing diversity) are typically not demonstrated until early adulthood (20's-30's) which typically exceeds the age range that traditional students are enrolled in higher education. Instructors in higher education often expect students to demonstrate the skills associated with self-authorship even if students are not developmentally equipped to perform them (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2004; Meszaros, 2007). The Learning Partnerships Model (LPM) was created to help students bridge the gap between a student's typical developmental level and his or her demonstration of an advanced skill as expected in the university setting. The model is founded upon the ideology of a constructivist-developmental educational theory which emphasizes the learner as an active seeker of knowledge that builds from their personal experiences (Savery & Duffy, 1995). The concept of self-authorship is most often used and has been effective in the field of student development within the higher education setting (Pizzolato, 2005; Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007). However, this action research utilizes the LPM to build preservice teachers' confidence in their abilities to teach in an inclusive classroom.

The LPM is comprised of three assumptions and three principles that are interrelated (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2004). The three assumptions of the Learning Partnerships Model are: knowledge is complex and should be socially constructed; student self is imperative to knowledge construction; and knowledge should be mutually created. The three assumptions challenge students to think independently by encouraging them to release their dependence on authority figures when constructing knowledge, whereas the three principles nurture the development of self-authorship. The three principles are validating students' capacity to know, situating learning in students' experiences, and learning happens through mutually constructing meaning. The benefit of using the Learning Partnerships Model as a pedagogical approach is that it allows students to strengthen their ability to know themselves, understand what they know, reflect on that knowledge, and make decisions based on it.

The design of the project focused on providing instruction, activities, and experiences that would help preservice teachers gain a deeper and more accurate understanding of inclusion, as well as the roles and responsibilities general education teachers assume in inclusive classrooms. The inclusion project was formed with the expectation that preservice teachers would encounter a disequilibrium in their thinking which would initiate the need for them to discover who they are as a future educator and what impact inclusion will have on them professionally. Table 1 depicts how the pedagogical and assessment components of the inclusion project were operationalized within the assumptions and principles of the LPM. The assumptions and principles are listed and the project components are placed in the category where it was best represented within the LPM's framework. It is important to note that the project components are capable of meeting multiple assumptions or principles, as depicted by the fluidity of the dashed lines between rows.

Table 1

Learning Partnerships Model in Educational Practice

Assumptions (challenge student dependence)	Principles (support development of self-authorship)	Inclusion Project (operationalized pedagogical and assessment components)
Knowledge is complex and should be constructed socially	Validate the students' capacity to know	*Collaboration on interview questions *Small and large group discussions * Field experience
Student self is critical to construction of knowledge	Situate learning in student experiences	*Access prior knowledge * Reflecting on prior experiences

Knowledge should be mutually constructed	Characterize learning as mutually constructing meaning	*Interview inclusion teacher
		*Collaborative environment
		*Peer interaction
		   -Venn diagram
		   -Discussions

Adapted from Baxter-Magolda, M. B., & King, P. M. (Eds.). (2004). *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship*. Sterling,VA: Stylus.

The inclusion project utilized self-reflection, direct instruction, and authentic practical experiences to increase confidence in preservice teachers' perception of preparedness. This model differs from some traditional introductory courses in that it offers an opportunity to have individual contact with inclusion teachers and elementary students. The authentic and direct experiences are followed up by in class discussions and assignments where the preservice teachers are able to voice questions or concerns and receive positive guidance from their peers and the instructor. The purpose of the project was to unveil some of the mystery of inclusion to alleviate the hesitancy and fear towards serving in an inclusive classroom.

Integrating LPM Assumptions and Principles

The three assumptions in the LPM model challenge preservice teachers in the areas of theory, knowledge, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development. These assumptions are based on the foundational principles of self-authorship: knowledge, identity, and relationships (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2004). The inclusion project connected with the assumptions primarily through the classroom environment. In the course context, materials were presented that caused student beliefs to be challenged. The preservice teachers engaged their peers in discussion about their beliefs. This compelled the preservice teachers to confront what they believed and consider their peers' perspective as well.

The three supportive principles include validating the students' capacity to know, situating learning in student experiences, and characterizing learning as mutually constructing meaning. The first principle, validating students as learners, was woven throughout the project by creating a classroom climate that valued student voice through small and large group discussions that encouraged sharing personal pre-existing ideas about inclusion. To accomplish this, their contributions in class were verbally affirmed and expanded upon. These strategies established a classroom that was predominantly student focused. It also allowed the preservice teachers to learn from a personal level, leading to a more meaningful understanding of the content. This was apparent through the quantity and quality of content relevant discussion during the course, as well as through the reflective assessment component of the project.

The second principle, situating learning in the learner's own experience, was employed through the assessment of prior knowledge and reflection on the preservice teachers' own K-12 experiences. The majority of students were eager to share their inclusion related school experiences and conversation flowed easily. For the few that were hesitant to engage in dialogue, they were asked specific questions to stimulate their thinking and increase their comfort level in

participating i.e., Did you ever experience an inclusive classroom? If so, what were your feelings about it? What were some notable characteristics of an inclusive classroom? The preservice teachers' personal school experiences were particularly important to draw from since they had very little, if any teaching experience. In lieu of teaching experience, their educational histories allowed them to fully participate in the project through analysis and reflection.

The final principle, mutually constructing meaning, was significant because it emphasized the relational aspect of teaching and learning. The student-instructor relationship played an integral role in constructing meaning, therefore the relationship was nurtured through situating the instructor and preservice teachers as equal partners in the learning process. This was achieved by connecting the instructor's knowledge to the preservice teachers' knowledge, asking them to supply examples, and guiding them in developing thoughts. Implementing these instructional strategies created an autonomous and connected learning environment where the preservice teachers could begin to take ownership of their education.

Description of the Inclusion Project

Participants

The inclusion project was implemented in an introduction to exceptionalities course that consisted of freshmen university students who intended to apply to the teacher education program. There were nine elementary majors and three secondary education majors. The rather small class size was advantageous because it allowed for greater use of small group discussions, peer feedback, and quick instructor responses. Several of the students were considering pursuing a minor or double major in special education and expressed a desire to learn more about the content area.

Component: Introduction

The project is comprised of three components: the course introduction, exploratory activities, and assessment. The following outlines the components of the project and how each was implemented in the classroom.

Access prior knowledge. Students answered the following questions based on their personal experiences and recorded them to use for future reference. The questions answered were: "What is your definition of inclusion?" and "What are the five primary responsibilities of a general education teacher in an inclusive classroom?" This was done in the first week of class before any new information was explored.

Introduce content. A short lecture style presentation titled "Introduction to Inclusion" was presented. This included basic special education information such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004, statistics of students served in inclusive settings, definition of inclusion, the implications for general and special education teachers, and educational placement options. The lesson was followed up with small group discussions on their personal experiences and perceptions of special education.

Component: Exploratory Activities

Interviews. The preservice teachers identified and interviewed a former general education teacher who they viewed as being effective. The stipulations were that the teacher had to be a current practitioner, must have or have had students with special needs in his/her classroom (inclusion teacher), and must currently serve in a gener.al education setting. The preservice teachers collaborated through an online discussion board to create questions they would like to ask the inclusion teachers that pertained to students with special needs and inclusion. The questions were refined, compiled, and posted in an interview format for all of the preservice teachers to use during the interview process. They were also encouraged to ask any other relevant questions during the interview. The following are the mutually constructed interview questions:

1. Have you taught students with disabilities in the general education classroom? Briefly describe your experiences. *(qualifying criteria for interviewee)*
2. What is your definition of inclusion?
3. What are the benefits of inclusion for the teacher and students?
4. What aspects of inclusion are difficult for the teacher?
5. How do you collaborate with the special education teacher(s) regarding the included students in your classroom?
6. What strategies have you found particularly helpful for teaching your students who are included (academic and behavioral)?
7. What are 5 most significant roles and responsibilities of a teacher regarding inclusion?
8. Do you have any advice for me (as a preservice teacher) and teaching students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Compare/contrast findings. After the preservice teachers had conducted their interviews and submitted the transcripts, they completed a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the inclusion teacher's input against their prior knowledge, as documented in the opening activity. They compared the two definitions of inclusion and examined the answers between the five primary roles of general education teacher in an inclusive classroom. Finally, the preservice teachers

presented their charts to the class and discussed the findings with their peers. As a class, they identified major themes between their prior knowledge and the actual knowledge of the general education inclusion teacher.

Field experience. The preservice teachers participated in a tutoring field experience at a local elementary school where they each worked with one or two elementary students. The elementary students were recommended by their classroom teachers based on the criteria of needing extra academic support. The preservice teachers made anecdotal notes about the strengths and weaknesses of their elementary students. They also made a list of the challenges and responsibilities they thought the child's teacher might face when educating students with diverse needs. Once this information was compiled, the preservice teachers were placed in small groups and asked to engage in a discussion to address the following topics:

- Constructing the tutee's academic profile
- Discussing potential challenges for the inclusive teacher
- Generating instructional and behavioral strategies they saw or could use
- Creating a list of pro and con list of an inclusive setting for their tutee

This activity was followed up with a small group 'brainstorming" session that focused on providing peer suggestions for their future tutoring sessions. The instructor participated in the conversations by asking guiding questions and encouraging further exploration of student challenges and solutions.

Component: Assessment.

Reflection. The preservice teachers wrote a reflective paper based on the progression of their thoughts and feelings throughout the project. The reflective paper functioned as a means to determine the educational outcomes of the project. The preservice teachers were given several questions to prompt their reflective thinking:

1. What were your perceptions/ beliefs on inclusion before participating in this project?
2. Have you experienced any changes in perspective, particularly on inclusion and roles/ responsibilities of inclusive teachers, from before and after the project?
3. Which the component of the project had the most impact on you?
4. Was the project beneficial…if so, how…if not, why?

Student Outcomes

The learning outcomes were assessed through anecdotal notes taken from course discussions and the reflective paper that was assigned at the conclusion of

the project. A descriptive qualitative analysis procedure was used to analyze the anecdotal and artifact data and extract meaningful insights. The criteria for identifying meaningful information included repetitive words or phrases, similarities between reviewed literature and student experiences, and other insights that represented perceptions or changes in thought. Chunks of meaningful data were extracted and analyzed to identify common themes. Three themes emerged and they were: shift in perception, instructional components, and future educational implications.

Shift in perception. The following are some of the participants' comments that indicate how their perceptions of inclusion changed over the project.

- "I thought that was it [inclusion], act as if the students with disabilities don't have them and have a 'normal' classroom."
- "Before this project I thought of inclusion as incorporating special education students into the general education classroom. I never considered what this means academically, socially, and emotionally for not only the students who have a disability, but also the students in the general education classroom."
- "Inclusion, before this project, was a foreign concept to me."
- "Before this class, I thought that students who received special education were 'bad' kids. Teachers and other students seemed to be the ones to give this label more than the actions of the kid."
- "It is sad for me to remember back to where I used to be and how close minded I never knew I was."

Instructional components. Participants provided comments about the instructional parts of the projects. The following are some examples about what was most meaningful to them.

- "Not all things that I learned from this project came from the steps of this project, but a lot came out of the thoughts and convictions that were provoked by what the teacher [that was interviewed] said, some of which I may not have had until later in my college career."
- "The most impactful portion of this project would have to be simply talking to the inclusion teacher. In talking to [teacher's name] I got to see her passion for what she does and I got to see what kinds of things I could implement in my own classroom. I really started to realize why I wanted to teach and that inclusion is what I want to do."
- "It's one thing to learn in a classroom on campus and another to actually see it happen in a classroom. We were not able to see this happen in a real classroom, however, hearing experiences from the teacher we interviewed helped make the process real along with teaching me important actions and ideas for when I become a teacher."

- "I thought that the interview with a teacher and the Venn diagram had the greatest impact on me. It really helped to see someone else's ideas and thoughts about inclusion. Especially someone who has had first-hand experience with it in their general education classes.
- "Analyzing my past ideas about inclusion, interviewing an actual teacher, and comparing our thoughts really helped me to grasp the importance of inclusion."
- "I loved how I was able to look deeply at my perspectives and find what areas of my personality towards children with special needs have to change."

Future educational implications. Participants responded about what they thought would be the future implications based on their participation in the project.

- "I would highly suggest doing this project for future classes. I think it is important to realize that it is not always about simply the academics, and that it is important to teach students to grow as a person as well."
- "The project was only a small step in my educational career, but made a huge impact on my life. I know more about inclusion now than I ever did before.
- "I thought this whole project was extremely beneficial because it allowed me to see through a teacher's eyes for once. I have been 'the student' for so long that it was eye opening to perceive ideas through that perspective."

Discussion

Implications for Teacher Education

Previous research has shown that introductory special education courses meet a critical need in increasing positive attitudes towards inclusion and students with special needs (Garriott, Snyder, & Miller, 2007; McHatton & Parker, 2013; Shade & Stewart, 2001). However, preservice teachers often do not feel prepared to teach in an inclusive setting (Costello & Boyle, 2013; Garriott, Snyder, & Miller, 2007; Jobling & Moni, 2004; Rojewski & Pollard, 1993). In order to meet this need, it is imperative for teacher educators to be active in constructing learning opportunities that have the potential to bridge the gap between positive feelings and being a confident practitioner.

Instructional strategies such as the Learning Partnerships Model highlight the benefits of implementing a focused content with the goal of meeting a specific need in a field of study. The primary goal of this project was to provide accurate and early exposure to freshmen level preservice teachers in order to build their confidence about serving in an inclusion classroom. The qualitative analysis

indicates that many of their initial fears and misconceptions were alleviated regarding inclusion as a result of the inclusion project.

This action research focused on increasing preservice teachers' perception and feeling of preparedness of inclusion through the use of reflection, direct instruction, and authentic practical experiences. It should be noted that the basic concepts of the project could be applied to a wide range of content areas. The valuable elements gleaned from the Learning Partnerships Model can be restructured to fit a multitude of different courses, instructional delivery methods, and teaching styles. It is recommended that a similarly structured project should include the following pedagogical emphasis:

- Students explore prior knowledge and beliefs about the chosen topic. This could be done through discussion, a KWL chart, or brief writing activity.
- Instructors create a learning environment that encourages active student participation through frequent discussions and questioning student statements in order to probe for deeper meaning.
- Provide opportunities for peer to peer learning and discussion. This can be accomplished through the use of small and large group discussion, presenting work samples, and allowing for reflection with peers.
- Students should connect early in their academic preparation with professionals in their field of study to explore their career. This course accomplished this by interviewing an inclusive teacher, but hosting a guest speaker or doing a group discussion with a professional would allow students the same exploratory opportunity.
- Provide opportunities to reflect on professional and personal growth. Formal and informal reflection was done at every stage of the project. It was done through writing, discussing, and reporting on assignments.

Future Research

This action research underscores the importance of following this instructional procedure: access prior knowledge, provide content instruction, exploratory learning, debrief, and reflect. It is vital for preservice teachers to understand general information on inclusion before they reach out to an inclusion teacher and start working with elementary students so they have a foundation for acquiring new knowledge from these learning experiences. One limitation of this project was the time constraint of the semester in which the project was conducted. It would have been beneficial to have more time allotted to discuss and create instructional and behavioral strategies that could have been used with their elementary tutee.

Future research in this area should examine how structuring a learning project around the LPM model might impact outcomes in various content areas and diverse topics. For instance, it would be valuable to know if the same project model could be effectively applied to business management or chemical engineering. To provide validation to the approach, a quantitative study could be done to collect data that supports or refutes the perceptions of preservice teacher participants. This could be done by assessing the section of students that participated in the inclusion project and another section that did not to determine if there is any significant difference between the groups' perceptions and feelings of preparedness. Future research could also be done by creating a longitudinal study and examining if the positive outcomes from participating in the project are evident later in coursework or early in their careers. Again, this could be in contrast to their peers that did not participate in the project. Since existing research expresses a serious need for teacher educators to prepare preservice teachers for successful functioning in inclusive settings, projects structured around the ideals of the Learning Partnerships Model provides a promising pedagogical strategy to expand early preservice teacher's knowledge and confidence about serving in an inclusion classroom.

Conclusion

Due to the growth of inclusion classrooms over recent years, it is vital that teacher educators equip students with the skills and confidence necessary to succeed in this setting. This action research presents an instructional approach to develop self-authorship in university students through an inclusion project. As demonstrated through artifact and anecdotal data, the skills associated with self-authorship assist in bridging the gap between possessing a positive attitude towards inclusion and increasing preservice teachers' level of preparedness to serve in an inclusive classroom.

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