

Research Articles

A Study of the Impact of Disability Studies on the Perceptions of Education Professionals

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Abstract: Scholars in the field of Disability Studies (DS) have asserted that introducing future and current educators to the field of DS may impact their perceptions of disability and their practices in supporting students with disabilities. However, little empirical research exists on how introduction to DS actually shifts their perspectives. This study examined the impact of Disability Studies online modules on the perceptions of education professionals. Results of this study suggested that participating in online modules and learning about Disability Studies did impact the ways in which some participants viewed disability, as well as their views on supporting students. These findings suggest that online DS learning modules could be a powerful tool in preparing education professionals to work with students with disabilities.

Keywords: inclusive education; online learning; teacher preparation

Despite a push over the last 40 years to include students with disabilities more authentically in general education classrooms, many students with disabilities continue to be educated in segregated settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The education system has made progress with some groups of students, such as those with learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), however, rates of access to general education environments for other groups of students, such as those with developmental disabilities have actually declined over the past ten years (Smith, 2012). Although many factors such as policy and funding may play a role in student access to general education contexts (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Taylor, 1978), teacher training and professional development are certainly a key consideration in increasing access (Leatherman & Niemeier, 2005). For example, Jordon, Glen, and McGhie-Richmond (2010) found that teachers who received training in supports and services for students with disabilities were much more likely to include students with disabilities successfully. Continuing to research effective ways to shape teacher perceptions and practices related to access for students with disabilities is of utmost importance.

To date, teacher training related to students with disabilities has relied heavily on the “medical model” of disability. Teachers are taught to view a student’s disability as a problem

that needs to be fixed (Valle & Connor, 2011). Often, the student is removed from the general education classroom until he or she is “fixed” or behaves more like the other “normal” students. Thus, the student is allowed back into classroom with peers without disabilities on the condition that the disability is eradicated or minimized. For example, a student with a significant reading disability may be placed in a self-contained (aka segregated) setting with the intent that the disability may be minimized through intensive therapy. Only when the student is able to read better is he allowed back into the general education classroom. This view of teaching and learning can be problematic because not only can it be used to justify segregated settings, it may lead to lack of opportunity to access a general education classroom.

It seems that many special and general educators are so immersed in the “medical model” way of thinking described above, that they may not consider the ways in which segregation of individuals with disabilities can act as a form of oppression, or the ways that segregation can ultimately hinder students’ academic and social success (Valle & Connor, 2011). Introduction to these ideas may at first create some friction between “old” and “new” ways of thinking, but may also ultimately lead to transformation of perceptions and practice related to supporting students labeled with disabilities in schools (Ashby, 2012). For example, teachers may recognize how improperly separating students with disabilities from the general population creates a sense of ableism in schools (Hehir, 2002). Therefore, introducing pre-service and in-service teachers to disability studies (DS) concepts could be a way to promote increased advocacy around inclusive education, and more inclusive educational practices (Ashby, 2012; Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008). This study explores how (if at all) online learning modules in Disability Studies shape teachers perceptions and practices related to inclusion of students with disabilities in K-12 schools.

What is Disability Studies in Education and Why Should Teacher Educators Care?

Disability Studies (DS) is a growing field that focuses on the phenomenon of “disability” across a wide range of areas including law, medicine, history, art, and media (Linton, 1998). DS views disability as a social, political, and cultural phenomenon (Goodley, 2012). For example, we used Linton’s (1998) definition in framing our work in this study:

“Disability Studies reframes the study of disability by focusing on it as a social phenomenon, social construct, metaphor, and culture utilizing a minority group model. It examines ideas related to disability in all forms of cultural representations throughout history, and examines the policies and practices of all societies to understand the social, rather than the physical or psychological, determinants of the experience of disability.

Disability Studies both emanates from and supports the Disability Rights Movement, which advocates for civil rights and self-determination. This focus shifts the emphasis from a prevention/treatment/remediation paradigm, to a social/cultural/political paradigm. This shift does not signify a denial of the presence of impairments, nor a rejection of the utility of intervention and treatment. Instead, Disability Studies has been developed to disentangle impairments from the myth, ideology, and stigma that influence social interaction and social policy. The scholarship challenges the idea that the economic and social statuses and the assigned roles of people with disabilities are inevitable outcomes of their condition” (p. 8).

Specifically, Disability Studies emphasizes the difference between the “medical model” and “social model” of disability. The “medical model” positions disability solely within the individual. Essentially the individual is looked at as “broken” and in need of being fixed (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011). Conversely, DS views disability through a “social model” lens. The social model presupposes that disability is situated in political, social, and economic contexts. The environmental, social, and political barriers society places upon individuals with impairments determine how “disabled” such individuals are in each context.

From a DS perspective, a person’s “disability” is directly related to how disability is represented and defined in current society. Furthermore, disability and impairment are viewed as two distinct entities. An impairment represents a person’s difference such as a person who is blind and his or her difference in ability to see, while a disability elucidates the barriers society places on such a person. In other words, DS emphasizes social and attitudinal barriers rather than individual impairments. For instance, a person may have an impairment such as a difference in the way the brain decodes the written word. However, the person is not “disabled” until society begins to place barriers such as lack of accessible text. If the text is made accessible through audio format for example, he or she may not be considered disabled. The focus is not on “fixing” the person so that the brain reads words in the same way, but rather on removing the barriers by creating pathways that would allow access. Thus, DS does not view a person’s disability as something that needs to be fixed or cured but focuses on removing the barriers that “create” the disability.

Disability Studies in Education (DSE) is based on Disability Studies principles and emerged from the field of DS. DSE applies the definition and framework of DS to the field of education (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012). DSE seeks to “promote the understanding of disability from a social model perspective” and to “challenge social, medical, and psychological models of disability as they relate to education” (American Educational Research Association Disability Studies in Education Special Interest Group [AERA DSE SIG], 2007). DSE offers the “why” to

the “how” of high access strategies for all students, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL; www.cast.org) and differentiating instruction (Tomlinson, 2000); situating access to general education curriculum and contexts within a social justice and civil rights framework (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). For example, teachers may learn about how to differentiate instruction and the research base associated with increasing access for students with disabilities, yet they may not fully understand why such access is important, and why this access should be considered a civil right. When a DSE framework is introduced, teachers then have a strong social justice framework from which to situate their practice.

The social justice framework associated with DSE not only relates to instructional practices such as UDL, it applies to assumptions about inclusive education overall. From a DSE perspective, inclusion is viewed as a social justice issue for individuals with disabilities. DSE explores how individuals in the education system can remove social and policy barriers that prevent students with disabilities from accessing general education curriculum and contexts. For example, teachers simply assume every student will be included and that it is their job to develop an environment and access to curriculum where that can happen (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008). Thus, DSE assumes that teachers play a significant role in creating and supporting access for students with disabilities in inclusive environments.

Given the importance of the role of teachers, introducing teachers to DSE concepts can assist them in understanding WHY inclusive opportunities are so important, and WHY our current system of education and overreliance on the medical model prevents students from accessing inclusive educational opportunities. For example, Ashby (2012) discusses how a program “grounded in disability studies principles” demonstrates “how a disability studies framework can inform and enrich teacher preparation” (p. 89). Ashby explains that teachers who have “traditional” views of individuals with intellectual disabilities may have assumptions about the deficits of these students as well as their inability to be included in general education classrooms. If the teacher is aware of the “social model” or social construction of disability, he or she may question some of these assumptions and be more aware of the social and political barriers that are in place. As Freire (1970) states, we must be able to identify sites of oppression in order to address them.

Lack of Exposure to DSE Concepts in Teacher Education

DSE assumptions run counter to current mainstream policies and practices associated with special education in K-12 school, and offer ways to view special education policy and practice from a critical lens. DSE scholars often stress that DSE is not rehabilitation, special education, or any other field involved with “fixing” or “curing” a disability (Linton, 1998; Ferguson &

Nusbaum, 2012). Not surprisingly, many in the field of “traditional” special education have been wary of DSE and actively critiqued a DSE approach to special education, even suggesting that DSE concepts will lead to the destruction of special education as a field and profession (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that despite the impact DSE may have on educator’s perceptions and practice in regard to individuals with disabilities, many teachers and teacher educators are not exposed to DSE concepts, and are often unfamiliar with the field as a whole (Cosier & Pearson, 2016).

Empirical Research on the Impact of DSE

As teachers and teacher educators, we suspected that one reason teachers and teacher educators may lack exposure to DSE concepts may be the scarcity of research on how, if at all, introduction to DSE may change perspectives and practice. Although many scholars have written about the possibilities for DSE to change perspective and practice, or have offered anecdotal information in this area (Ashby, 2012; Baglieri, Bejoian, Broderick, Connor, & Valle, 2011), at the time of this study, we could not find empirical research associated with how, if at all, a web-based introduction to DSE changed teachers’ perceptions and practices associated with special education and disability. Thus, we sought to add to the field of DSE, by exploring how, if at all, online DSE modules impacted teachers’ perspective and practice.

Online Learning Modules for Pre-service and In-service Teachers

Over the past few decades, there has been an increase in popularity of online learning for pre-service and in-service educators (Chitanana, 2012; Brown & Green, 2003). Online learning is rapidly becoming the preferred model by teachers because of its convenience and suitability for educator’s busy lifestyles. This approach to learning allows teachers to avoid staying after hours, missing instructional days, or attending weekend workshops for professional development. Holmes, Signer, and MacLeod (2010) state “the online environment incorporates a level of convenience for the participant, as it can eliminate the need for travel, childcare, and scheduled class sessions” (p. 76).

Another aspect to online education is the way in which it provides accessibility to the learner. Online education helps meet the needs of participants who best learn outside of traditional classroom settings; participants with and without disabilities. By presenting information in an online format, each participant has the opportunity to personalize his or her educational experience (Smith & Basham, 2014). Learning online provides individuals with the ability to access material at their own pace and through various modalities. Further, it gives a way to control their learning environment to meet their needs (e.g. sensory processing) (Smith &

Basham, 2014). While online material does not change the content for the learner, it can make the material accessible when it may not be otherwise.

Not only are online modules convenient and potentially more accessible, they can also be effective for teachers. Holmes, Signer & MacLedo (2010) posit that quality professional development must contain “experiences that are purposefully designed, situated in rich context centered in classroom instruction, and successfully integrated with powerful learning tools for teaching and learning” (p. 77). These are essential components in any platform for effective learning. As long as these are the components within the online learning platform, the online learning platform can be just as effective as a face-to-face approach.

The benefits of online learning, including accessibility and convenience complement the work of DSE in many ways. Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton (2008) indicate that DSE has its own set of tenets, one of which is to promote inclusive and meaningful access to education. Learning in an online format may create avenues for learning and/or break down barriers inherent in traditional “in-person” professional development (Smith & Basham, 2014). Providing an alternative way to gain knowledge allows participants to focus on their strengths and work at their own pace. In this way, online learning promotes equity and access to education and goes hand in hand with the principles of DSE.

Theoretical Framework: Transformative Teacher Education

This research is situated within the framework of Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) (Kitchenham, 2008). Transformative Learning Theory is a “deep structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions” (Transformative Learning Centre, 2004). Mezirow et al., (2009) defined transformative learning theory as “learning that transforms problematic frames of references to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change” (p. 22). This conceptual framework analyzes how individuals learn new information and how their thoughts, or frames of reference, can be reframed based on this new information. The changes, or transformation, become a structural shift in ideas, feelings, and actions that are viewed as positive and promote growth (Merriam, 2004).

Paulo Freire (1970) explored the theory of transformative learning in which he referred to conscientization or consciousness. This concept of critical consciousness can be described as “a process in which learners develop the ability to analyze, pose questions, and take action on the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts that influence and shape their lives” (Dirkx, 1998, p.3). When an individual obtains new information, he or she is able to engage in a deeper understanding of his/her world, and can then make changes based upon new information. Thus,

people begin to develop a critical consciousness and their perceptions and practices are subsequently altered. This critical consciousness is developed through processes of critical reflection and reflective discourse, which support “transformative learning” (Feinstein, 2004, p. 109).

As part of the critical reflection and reflexive discourse, individuals engage in a process of constant learning and reconstruction (Kitchenham, 2008). Mezirow (2000) claimed that the types of learning included the following: (a) elaborating existing frames of reference, (b) learning new frames of reference, (c) transforming habits of mind, and (d) transforming points of view. These changes in perspectives allow for existing experiences to be understood in new ways (Cranton, 1994; Daloz, 1986). The development that occurs with TLT is ongoing and leads to “greater autonomy in thinking” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 29). In consideration of this study, transformative learning allows adults to develop their existing frames of reference by critically examining and questioning their beliefs and assumptions.

Statement of Problem and Research Questions

Given the lack of Disability Studies content in teacher preparation programs, and the lack of opportunities current teachers have to Disability Studies related information, there is certainly a need for a space where in-service and pre-service teachers can access such information. In the context of this study, the researchers sought to explore how (if at all) online professional learning modules on Disability Studies transformed the perceptions and practices of in-service and pre-service teachers. Specifically, we wanted to know if teachers began to develop a critical consciousness based on this new information and if a structural shift occurred in ideas because of this information. This study focused on the following research questions: (1) Do teachers and education professionals have knowledge of the area of Disability Studies; and (2) How (if at all) do online Disability Studies modules impact teacher and other education professional’s perceptions and practices related to educating students with disabilities?

Method

Participants

To explore how individuals in the education field understood the fundamental concepts of Disability Studies, and how these concepts could influence their perceptions and practices, the researchers sought out individuals working in education, or those interested in the field, to participate in the modules at their own leisure and in their own environment. A link to an anonymous survey was located at the bottom of each module page. We used random sampling in this study, and a total of 47 individuals participated; 39 were in professions related to the education field (e.g. teacher, behavior interventionist, speech language pathologist), four

identified themselves as parents of individuals with disabilities, two identified themselves as college students taking courses in special education or disability related topics, and one identified as an advocate. In addition to profession, the survey asked respondents to identify the number of years of experience in the field of education. Experience in the field ranged from 0-15+ years, and education of participants ranged from some college to possessing a doctoral degree (see Table 1).

When engaging in the modules, a total of 22 individuals participated in one module, while the other 25 viewed two or more modules. The most visited page was *A message about DSE*, which provided a general overview of DSE as a field. Approximately 47% of participants visited (N = 22) this page. Other most visited pages were *Social Model* and *Individualized Instruction*, which were visited by 23% (N =11) and 21% (N=10) of participants respectively. Other modules including *Community Building*, *Intro to DSE* and *Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP)*, and *Eugenics* were viewed by 8 participants (17%). *Segregation as a Teaching Strategy* and *Parent – School Professional Partnerships (PSPP)*, as well as the *Resource* page of the site were viewed by 6 participants.

Table 1: Participants and Responses

Number of participants	Area within the field of education	Years in the field	Education Level	Exposure to DS prior to modules		Yes, the module(s) changed the way I think about special education & supporting student with disabilities in school?	
				Yes	No	Yes	No
4	Special education K-12	0-15+ years	4/Masters	2	2	3	1

6	Special Education Pre-K/Early Childhood	0-15+ years	3/Bachelor 3/Masters	4	2	3	3
6	General education K-12	3-15 years	3/Bachelors 3/Masters	3	3	6	0
3	General Education Pre-K/Early Childhood	0-15+ years	3/Bachelors	1	2	2	1
7	Pre-service educators	0-2 years	2/Some College 1/AA 2/Bachelors 2/Masters	5	2	6	1
5	Teaching Assistant/Paraprofessional	0-2 years	1/Some College 2/Associates 1/Bachelors 1/Masters	0	2	2	0
4	Faculty	15+ years	1/Masters 3/Doctorate	3	1	3	1
4	Related Service Provider	3-15 years	1/AA 3/Masters	1	3	3	1
4	Parents	0-15+ years	2/Some College 2/Bachelors Degree	2	2	1	1
4*	Student/Doctoral Students	0-15 years	1/Bachelors 1/Masters 1/Doctorate	3	0	2	1

* **Note:** One participant declined to answer.

Website and Online Learning Modules

The website is designed for pre-service and in-service teachers, as well as anyone in the education field seeking knowledge in the area of DSE (www.chapmandisabilitystudies.com). The website contains multiple pages within the site. Each page is considered a module. Each module provides information on a topic in the education field as related to DSE. The modules generally follow similar formats. Each module begins with an introduction to the topic, followed by a video and/or additional text that explore the topic in more depth. The text and videos are followed by essential questions, objectives and additional content for participants to consider and explore. Lastly, each module concludes with additional recommended readings and resources at the bottom of each page. For example, the Social Model of Disability module begins with a short description of the difference between the social model and medical model by DS and DSE scholars such as Valle and Connor (2011) and Linton (1998). This introduction is followed by a cartoon by Michael Giangreco (2002) that asks participants to consider how the cartoon relates to the social model of disability. The cartoon is followed by the essential questions such as “How can social model thinking be integrated in the educational system?” and objectives including “Describe the how the social model differs from the medical model of disability.” The essential questions and objectives are followed by additional content that describes the “social model” and “medical model” in further detail, including a link to an animated explanation of the social model on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9s3NZaLhcc4>). Lastly, the page includes recommended readings on the social model such as Hughes (2010) and Shakespeare and Watson (2002).

The website includes a recommended order of modules for participants to follow. The first recommended module titled Intro to DSE provides an overview of definitions of disability, asks participants to reflect on their own experiences with disability, and introduces fundamental concepts of DSE. Following the introduction of DSE, the site recommends that the participant explore the Social Model module which provides brief content on the history of disability and lends itself to detailed information on what the social model of disability means, and how it is constructed. This module assists participants in understanding how society disables individuals, and demonstrates the difference between impairment and disability.

The next two modules are called Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) and Segregation as a Teaching Strategy. The DAP module looks critically at developmentally appropriate practices as it guides curriculum and provides a framework for early educators to determine whether children are making progress towards developmental milestones. The module

illustrates how a child's lack of progress in meeting developmental stages leads to intervention services, to "fix" the child, which aligns with the "medical model" or special education philosophy. Segregation as a Teaching Strategy helps participants understand the relationship of segregation to gender, race, and disability, and examines segregation of individuals with disabilities in K-12 schools and the broader community. The module focuses on supporting the development of new ideas for teaching students with disabilities that promote inclusion.

The module titled Sped vs. DSE provides a more in-depth background of DSE, distinguishes the differences between Disability Studies and Special Education and displays them in a visual format as two separate disciplines. This module helps participants understand how the approach of two these philosophies differ in the field of education.

The Individualized Instruction, Community Building, and Parent-School Professional Partnership modules provide an overview of classroom practice and parent-teacher collaboration from a DSE perspective. The Individualized Instruction module analyzes whether the practice of individualized instruction hinders the influence of inclusive practices, or students with disabilities being educated in the general education setting. Furthermore, the module reiterates how individualized instruction is not, or should not be, specific to special education programs.

The Community Building module examines the importance and purpose of community building in inclusive classrooms. It also identifies the benefits of community building for students with and without disabilities in inclusive classrooms, and provides educators with practical strategies to support building communities in their classrooms. The Parent-School Professional Partnerships (PSPP) module examines the partnership between parents and the school professionals and its historical emergence in the education system, with a specific focus on special education.

The last module in the series is titled Eugenics in Education. This module strives for participants to understand the American Eugenics Movement and how it contributed to the segregation and sterilization of individuals with disabilities. It is designed for educators to learn about the link between eugenics and the historical practices related to identifying, labeling and classifying individuals considered "abnormal" or "deviant."

The last page on the site offers a variety of resources, which relate to DSE and inclusion. The resources include websites, blogs, academic readings, books, and movies that can provide support as an extension to professional development for educators. For example, the page includes links to additional websites with Disability Studies-related information as well as links to resources related to inclusive education.

Survey

The e-survey used in this study focused on the participants' knowledge of Disability Studies prior to using the online modules and their knowledge of Disability Studies acquired after participating in the modules. Further, the survey was intended to explore whether or not participating in the modules changed the perceptions and practice of those working in the field of education. Participants were able to access the survey through a link posted on each page/module. The survey consisted of 12 questions/short answers, some of which included the participant's position, and years in the field of education. Other questions and short answers related to the participants experience with Disability Studies and/or special education:

- a. Were you exposed to Disability Studies prior to viewing the modules?
- b. If you had been exposed to Disability Studies, please explain how?
- c. How do/would you define Disability Studies?
- d. Explain how (if at all) participating in the module(s) changed the way you think about special education and supporting students with disabilities in school?

To view the survey in its entirety, go to chapmandisabilitystudies.com.

Analysis

In order to answer the research questions, we used non-experimental quantitative descriptive analysis, a one sample t-test, and qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We were interested in identifying trends such as the number of participants who had prior knowledge of or exposure to Disability Studies and the modules respondents decided to access. Furthermore, in order to answer research question 2 regarding whether or not participation in the modules changed their view of special education services and supports for students with disabilities, we used a one-sample t-test to assess whether there was a statistically significant difference between respondents who answered "yes," and those who answered "no." Due to the sample size, we chose to use descriptive statistics to analyze sub-groups (McMillan, 2012).

In addition to the quantitative analyses, we used qualitative analyses to identify themes regarding where or how individuals received training. Thematic analysis allowed the researchers to ground the analysis in our current transformation theory framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theoretical framework and our specific interest in participant change or transformation drove the analysis in this study. This type of analysis tends to provide a more detailed analysis of particular aspects of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Changes in Perceptions

About half of the participants (47%; N= 24) in the study had not heard of Disability Studies prior to participating in the online module. Those that had heard of DS before indicated that they had learned about it from various sources such as friends or in a college class. 46 participants responded to whether participating in the modules made them think differently about disability and/or special education, with total of 32 respondents indicating “yes,” that participating in one or more modules changed his or her view on special education policy and/or practice. Conversely, 14 of those participants responded “no.” Results of the one sample t-test indicated a significant difference between participants who answered “yes” and those who answered “no” to the question of change in perspective ($t(45)=2.56, p=.05$).

We continued to analyze responses of sub-groups using descriptive statistics. Of the 24 respondents who indicated they had not heard of Disability Studies before, 18 (75%) indicated that using the modules made them think differently about special education policy and/or practice. Of those who had heard of DS before (N=22), 10 (45%) indicated that participating in the modules changed their perspective on special education policy or practice. There did not appear to be a pattern regarding which modules participants completed and whether or not they felt it changed their perspectives or practice.

Analysis of the qualitative responses include 35 out of the 47 participants who responded to the open-ended questions related to how the modules changed perceptions or practice. Many participants indicated that they found the modules simply informative as they had never heard of Disability Studies; others indicated the modules made them question certain educational practices. Participant responses also resulted in three overarching themes: the social model and social justice, the need for change in special education, and individualized approaches to teaching.

Changes in Perspective of Disability

A number of participants discussed how the modules changed their overall view of disability or gave them a perspective they had not considered. For example, one participant mentioned:

“The first video where everybody is talking, murmuring, and staring at the able bodied man is thought provoking. While it certainly is a little over the top, the point is well

taken. Severely disabled people always get stared at and I'm sure talked about. This module made me think what it would be like to live disabled.”

Another respondent indicated that the modules made him or her consider the negative connotation a disability label may carry:

“I had never even thought of how disability was labeled in the dictionary, nor had I thought of how a person might feel being labeled by a word with such a negative meaning. This study has changed my perspective and has piqued my interest in learning more about disability studies.”

Similar responses indicated that these modules helped clarify the field of Disability Studies. One participant simply mentioned, “I learned the true differences between Special Education and DS.” Another participant mentioned how the modules helped clear up her misconceptions about Disability Studies as a field. “I thought it was an area that focused and fine-tuned educators knowledge on Special Needs programs. I didn't consider the societal aspect of disabilities being a specialization.” A third participant indicated similar thoughts, “The difference between disability studies and spec. ed was eye opening and I feel that most teachers can benefit from training.” These responses suggest that these modules helped to clarify the common misconception that Disability Studies is synonymous with special education and rehabilitation.

Social Model and Social Justice

Many participants indicated how they began to see the social model of disability more clearly. For example, one participant stated, “This really approaches it from a broad social view and aims for better educational outcomes. The political and social context is taken into consideration here and the need for action for change in those spheres is addressed.” Another participant indicated, “I always think about how students and families deal with daily life and prejudices, however this really brought it to another level.” Furthermore, a participant indicated seeing society as a whole moving toward more inclusive models, “Society is changing at a rapid pace and so are our students. I feel we are going toward a push-in model and full inclusion, rather than removal from the general education class.” These remarks suggest that teachers not only gained a clearer understanding of disability as a social construction, but were also “moved to action.”

There were clear connections between the need for social justice and change. One participant commented:

“Disability Studies is the change that is needed. I have always felt strongly about changes that need to be made to treat all students/people equally and with respect. Disability Studies champions this cause and will be the driving force to better education systems in the future.”

Another participant articulated a similar view of the need for change, “I am more determined than ever to do everything in my power to educate parents about the damage Common Core type thinking will do to our wonderful, unique students with learning disabilities.” These comments suggest that participants recognized the advocacy and social justice related aspects of Disability Studies and that these resonated with them in meaningful ways.

Need for Change in Special Education

The educators who participated in this study indicated that the modules made them see a need for change in current special education practices or policy. One educator began to see the need for change in teacher training:

“I, more strongly now than before I read the modules, feel the need for changes in the credential programs to teach all future teachers to teach all students. Now that I know there is a field of study out there working on changes, it gives me hope for the future.”

Another educator referenced need for changes in current special education law:

“The concept of redefining the law by evaluating our methods is necessary. The children we once taught in the 70s with disabilities are now our colleagues so their feedback and the data we take daily should influence if not dictate necessary changes in the law.”

In addition, yet another participant indicated, “It reminded me that special education often supports the problem.” Similarly, a general education teacher stated, “Perhaps the end result of the special education system actually hinders the progress of disabled individuals, rather than helping them, as intended.” Lastly, a participant remarked:

“As I have started to study Disability Studies, it has kind of blown my mind in that I feel like I'm having to unlearn everything I have learned in the past. I have always supported inclusion in schools, but it is making me look more at the trends in school where that doesn't happen as much as it should.”

Individualized Instruction

Participants also commented on “individualized instruction” in a variety of ways. For example, one participant discussed possible lack of individualized instruction in self-contained settings, “Having students in special day classes with extra staff but it may not be individualized through worksheets and work packets.” Two participants discussed individualized instruction in terms of how they could improve planning for individualized instruction in the classroom. One stated, “I am a general educator who has a high volume of students on IEPs- reading about Disability Studies has caused myself to be very aware of the practices of my own school. I have also been trying to focus on my students unique abilities instead of what they cannot do.” The other participant expressed similar sentiment when stating, “The piece on individualized instruction was the most helpful. I am already approaching lesson design with a clearer vision for learner outcomes and seeing the student opposed to the groups they could fit into.”

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that Disability Studies can impact perspectives and practices of teachers and education professionals in the field. The statistical significance of the t-test indicated that these modules could change perspectives on special education and disability. This research supports anecdotal evidence from scholars such as Ashby (2012), who have seen results within teacher education programs. Some participants began to view special education from a critical lens, which is imperative in addressing some of the practices that serve to unnecessarily segregate students with disabilities in schools. More participants who had not been exposed to DSE prior to the modules indicated that the modules impacted their perceptions. A further detailed exploration on the impact on participants who had and had not been exposed to DS would support a more in-depth understanding of this response and the possible impact of the modules. Overall, the results suggest that inclusion of a Disability Studies approach in teacher preparation and professional development may help in-service and pre-service teachers understand the importance of the social model and of questioning oppressive special education practices at their schools.

Possibilities for Enriching Teacher Preparation Programs and Professional Development

Ferri (2006) posits that we should be “teaching to trouble” in our educator preparation programs. Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) insist that including social justice issues in teacher education is essential in preparing teachers to work in today’s diverse schools. Introducing teachers to the social model allows them to not only see the sociopolitical aspects of disability, but to identify the societal changes that need to be made in order to create more access for

students with disabilities. We need to prepare teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers not only to provide quality instruction, but to also act as change agents.

DS provides a platform for focusing on issues of social justice and disability. Teacher educators may embed DS into their curriculum and move beyond basic theories and methods, to promoting a deeper understanding of the impact of special education practices. For example, the *Segregation as a Teaching Strategy* module covers the oppressive nature of segregation in education, as well as the connections between segregation, race, gender, and disability. This allows students to observe the “social model” of disability in action. As teachers begin to acknowledge the social and political aspects of disability, they may consider those aspects more when making decisions about when and how to educate students with disabilities.

Teacher advocacy for students with disabilities can be a powerful tool in supporting the success of students with disabilities. As is evidenced by this research, teachers may then be more ready and willing to advocate on the behalf of the students with disabilities as they are more attune to the sites of oppression. Teachers seemed to realize that current special education practices require change if students with disabilities are going to be afforded full access to general education curriculum and peers. They seemed more ready and willing to advocate for these changes. Introducing these teachers to the advocacy-based language of Disability Studies provides them with the tools to articulate the need for changes in oppressive practices they witness at their schools.

Ease of Access Through Online Modules

Yang and Liu (2004) indicate that teachers view online professional development and training as very effective. Thus, these modules may be viewed as an effective tool for teachers and teacher educators. Furthermore, given the costs and time concerns associated with “in person” professional development, these modules could be a useful tool for folks who are interested in learning more about DS, without the cost or time commitment. These modules are free and accessible to teacher educators, parents and others in the U.S. and abroad that are interested in introducing their students to a DS approach. Teachers can choose to access one or many modules related to DS at their leisure and on their own time. This is an important component of increasing access to the field of Disability Studies in Education.

Limitations

Although we consider this study to have relevant implications for the field of special education and Disability Studies, we certainly acknowledge its limitations. Use of a larger

sample size would improve the generalizability of results. Furthermore, we may want to find more ways to reach out to possible participants through social media and email contacts. This would allow for follow-up interviews that may provide for a richer description of changes in perspectives and practice related to the modules. Lastly, we hope to revise and refine the survey in order for it to more accurately assess the changes in perspectives and practice that are attributed to participation in the modules.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our preliminary findings indicate that online modules are a relevant avenue for introducing teachers to DS concepts, and that Disability Studies can change the perceptions and practices of current and future teachers and related education professionals such as school psychologists and parents. Thus, DS can certainly enrich the current curricula in teacher preparation programs and professional development. Many would consider Disability Studies on the “fringe” of mainstream special education practices that only a few special education teacher preparation and doctoral programs in education offer as a course of study. However, given the results of this study and the benefits of introducing Disability Studies to teachers, it seems a great time for Disability Studies to become a more significant part of teacher education and teacher professional development programs. These online modules are just one way of many to support access and opportunities for inclusive education for people with disabilities.

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