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Service learning via distance education for special education pre-teacher candidates and their self-efficacy regarding typical book adaptations for young children with communication disabilities

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Abstract

Pre-Service special education teacher candidates in an online early childhood special education (ECSE) course participated in a service-learning project regarding the adaptation of a typical classical children's book in an effort to support a child with a communication disability to be able to access content from an on-grade level text. Teacher candidates participated in a mixed methods study regarding their self-efficacy in adapting typical books for young children with communication disabilities in educational settings that included online book adaptation training within their college course. This research study also involved special education pre-service teachers' self-efficacy concerning teaching and adapting typical books to support access to the general curriculum. Pre and post self-efficacy data were collected on the 26 special education pre-service teacher participants. Qualitative data were collected from open-ended reflective responses to questions about the self-efficacy of special education pre-service candidates regarding book adaptations leading to supportive differentiation for teaching young students with communication disabilities. Quantitative data showed limited impact, but the qualitative data indicated that the adapted book project had a positive impact on the self-efficacy of the special education pre-service teacher participants.

Keywords: Special education, pre-service teachers, self-efficacy, adaptations, early literacy, communication disorders

Introduction

Purpose

Early childhood special education (ECSE) programming is increasingly becoming more inclusive on school campuses. Special education teachers supporting little students in ECSE classrooms are expected to support those students in accessing the general curriculum. Special education teacher candidates now require multiple types of differentiation skills (Including literacy support adaptations) for their students and especially for those ECSE students placed in inclusive environments. The purpose of this study was to learn how special education pre-service teachers' self-efficacy was impacted by adapting and sharing the content from a classical typical book with children with communication disabilities.

Theoretical Framework

The requirement for accountability in public school classrooms continues to be a priority for the Office of Special Education Programs within the Department of Education. Special education teachers' self-efficacy in teaching children with communication disabilities is very important. "Social cognitive theory explains psychosocial functioning in terms of triadic reciprocal causation" (Bandura, A., 1988, p. 27) ^[4] between cognition in tandem with human factors, behavior, and environments and "subscribes to a model of emergent interactive agency" (Bandura, A., 2001, p.2) ^[2] allowing for people to see themselves as personal causal agents within life choices they make (Bandura, A., 2012, 1999, 1986) ^[1]. Central to personal agency in one's life is the concept of self-efficacy in that "unless people believe they can produce desired results and forestall detrimental ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties" (Bandura, A., 2001, p. 6) ^[2]. Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2001) ^[18] state teacher efficacy is related to "persistence, enthusiasm, commitment, and instructional behavior" and supports positive student achievement in classrooms. Special education pre-service teacher self-efficacy is vital to positive on level content outcomes for young students with communication disabilities in

both self-contained and inclusive preschool classroom settings. Teaching special education pre-service teachers to pre-plan for future little students with communication disabilities provides an early professional opportunity to increase self-efficacy prior to meeting the demands of on-the-job lesson planning and individualized education program (IEP) commitments for their future students. Learning to adapt books for students with communication disabilities in an early childhood special education (ECSE) pre-service university course requires preservice special education university “students to determine and meet real, defined community needs” (Watson, J. B., 2013).

Literature Review

The Executive Summary of the Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs (2015) addressed a combined issue between the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Education. This policy statement recommended to states to develop educational systems that “ensure state certifications, credentials, and workforce preparation programs have a strong focus on inclusion” (2015, p. 4). One legal consideration stated regarding inclusion placements for children with disabilities written within the Executive Summary document is that the “Individual’s with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, presumes that the first placement option considered for an eligible child with a disability is the regular classroom the child would attend if he or she did not have a disability” (2015, p. 2). The Executive Summary (2015) document refers to a “shared vision” including continuance of inclusion placement considerations in all school grades and even post-school transition environments such as workplace and community environments. The Executive Summary (2015) further stated the definition of inclusion as it relates to early childhood programs:

Inclusion in early childhood programs refers to including children with disabilities in early childhood programs, together with their peers without disabilities; holding high expectations and intentionally promoting participation in all learning and social activities, facilitated by individualized accommodations; and using evidence-based services and supports to foster their development (cognitive, language, communication, physical, behavioral, and social-emotional), friendships with peers, and sense of belonging. This applies to all young children with disabilities, from those with the mildest disabilities, to those with the most significant disabilities (p. 3).

The IDEA of 2004 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandate students with disabilities have the right to access the general education curriculum supporting “the changing landscape of elementary classrooms” into inclusive education environments. (McHatton & Parker, 2013, p. 186) ^[13]. Inclusive classrooms within schools are “becoming the norm” (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012, p. 16) ^[16] and pre-service teacher candidate preparation programs should include intentional supportive programming to prepare future teachers to teach students with disabilities. One must consider this especially applies to special education teacher candidate programs. One main objective for teacher candidate preparation programs is “to develop future teachers who hold inclusive attitudes toward diverse student groups and who are willing to advocate on their

behalf” (Crowson & Bandes, 2013, p. 161) ^[8] within the inclusive school environment; as well as advocate for access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities. One very important consideration should include thoughts regarding programming for pre-service special education teacher candidates that “leads to the development of teachers’ practical wisdom in ensuring equity” (Florian, 2009, p. 534) ^[9] in access to the general curriculum.

The definition of inclusion from the above Executive Summary (2015) document sets a high standard for all teachers, including those in the field of special education. This thought calls into question the actual attitudes and self-efficacy pre-service special education teacher candidates may have about supporting students with disabilities in inclusive practices and general education curriculum access. Pre-service teacher candidate attitudes “are a critical component” regarding teaching students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012, p 16) ^[16]. One might add for special education candidates that attitudes are critical for supporting and advocating for students with disabilities to access the general education curriculum.

Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2007) state that teacher self-efficacy may be defined “as individual teachers’ beliefs in their own abilities to plan, organize, and carry out activities required to attain given educational goals” (p. 612). Teacher self-efficacy refers to the concept that how teachers’ view their own abilities influences their own desire to try new teaching methods and/or strategies (Takahashi, 2011) ^[15]. One research study of pre-service teacher candidates, Taylor & Ringlaben (2012) ^[16] found that both positive teaching attitudes and self-efficacy were achieved in tandem by participating in an undergraduate pre-service course addressing inclusion.

A change in beliefs regarding attitudes of responsibility in pre-service programming may lessen fears and result in the “development of effective instructional techniques” (Jordan, Schwartz, McGhie-Richmond, 2009, p. 541) ^[12] within inclusion classrooms.

While a body of research regarding pre-service teachers, their attitudes and self-efficacy exists in general, “little is known about the effects of teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs in the complex realm of literacy instruction” (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011, pg. 753) ^[19]. This study attempts to increase special education pre-service teacher candidates with increased self-efficacy toward teaching students with communication disabilities ways to access the general education literacy curriculum in school classrooms. Knowing that one part of the IDEA requires students with disabilities to have access to the general curriculum, special education teacher candidate preparation programs have a responsibility to instruct special education candidates in undergraduate course programming ways to teach and advocate for access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities.

Creating adaptations for on-grade-level books and text materials is one strategy that special education pre-service teacher candidates can learn and practice in service-learning field experiences which could increase their attitudes and self-efficacy toward teaching students with disabilities. Literacy adaptation training within coursework might even increase the successfulness of their future students in literacy activities. Adaptation is described in this thought as the concept of customizing materials leading students with

disabilities achievement of functional acquisition of the general education. Adapting hard copies of books used in general education classrooms is also a way to address the challenge of assisting students with disabilities in classrooms to access the general curriculum. Some adaptations of books could include, “summarizing novels in brief passages, pairing keywords with picture symbols, and adding a repeated story line that emphasizes the main idea of the story” (Hudson, Browder, and Wakeman, 2013, pg. 14). Teaching special education pre-service teacher candidates adapted book strategies to share with children with disabilities may “increase pre-service teachers’ knowledge and understanding of students with disabilities and decrease any negative attitudes they may hold” (Crowson & Brandes, 2014, pg. 176)^[8]. Of importance for pre-service special education candidates could especially be negative attitudes about how to plan, teach, and advocate for student access to the general curriculum in the area of literacy.

Methods

Mixed methods were used to address the research question: Is the self-efficacy of college pre-service special education teacher candidates on supporting access to typical general education literacy instruction with preschool learners with communication disabilities impacted as a result of participation in an adapted book project during an online early childhood special education (ECSE) course? A pre-experimental design utilizing mixed methods with no control group was used. This research study involved 26 special education pre-service teacher candidates participating in an adapted book activity to address access to general education early literacy curriculum for young students with communication disabilities. During a three-week project in a senior level early childhood special education (ECSE) course, special education pre-service candidates studied fair use copyright law, the American Sign Language (ASL) alphabet, and online course modules in early literacy in tandem with craft material supports to differentiate and adapt a typical classical preschool general curriculum book for a young child with a communication disability served in ECSE public school programming. The research participants were also required to share their adapted book from their course project with a child with a communication disability adding a service-learning component to their project requirements.

Procedures

The online special education early childhood (ECSE) course syllabus included the required classical typical book to be used in the project and the university bookstore was asked to stock it as a required course text for student purchase. The syllabus also included required teaching craft materials that would be needed for the project. These included things such as: access to a laminator, safety utility box cutter, scissors, velcro, binder rings, sharpie markers, hole punch, pencil bag. Prior to participating in the adapted book project online course module special education pre-service candidates were asked to rate themselves on their self-efficacy using a five-point likert scale. They were asked to rate themselves on their knowledge and confidence levels regarding teaching students with disabilities. The special education professor filmed a video explaining the adapted book project requirements and modeled the steps required

for adapting the typical preschool book all students would utilize for this project. Teacher candidates submitted to the online course dropbox their signed research study participation documents.

The special education professor taught the pre-service special education candidates strategies for adapting books (assistive technology, copyright laws pertaining to equal access for students, and review of differentiation strategies in lesson delivery). Online lessons also included characteristics of young children with communication disabilities potentially enrolled in ECSE programming. Online discussions within the course modules included state and national standards and requirements for students with disabilities having access to the general education curriculum. The Texas Early Childhood Outcomes (2011) information was also taught within the online modules so that the pre-service special education teachers could have access to a document in their future careers with differentiation ideas for accessing the general curriculum for young children with communication disabilities. The participants learned to locate themes in a typical general education pre-school book and match these with preschool standards within the *Texas Early Childhood Outcomes* document for students with communication disabilities. The special education pre-service teacher candidates were required to add a service-learning field experience component to their project in which they were required to read and share their book with at least one child with a communication disability enrolled in ECSE programming. Each participant was required to video themselves sharing their final adapted book and submit the video to a dropbox within the course for the professor to view. Along with their video submissions, each participant submitted a self-evaluation rubric grading themselves on their adapted book product. Each received their rubric scores for their course grade on the book project.

Illustration 1 shows an example of a book project page adaptation using American Sign Language (ASL). Illustration 2 shows some additional pieces with velcro on the backs of the pieces for alphabet lessons. Both illustrations show binder rings making the pages turn easier and allowing for the additional thickness of the book as lesson adaptation pieces are added to the pages by a young student with a communication disability.

Illustration 1

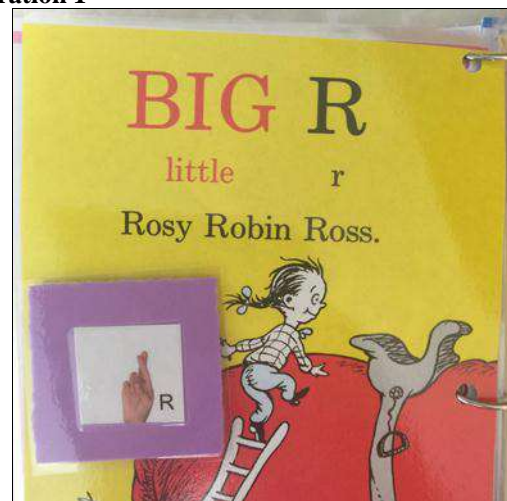


Fig 1: Adapted Book Page ASL

Illustration 2

Fig 2: Adapted Book Pieces with Velcro

Upon completion of the adapted book project the special education pre-service candidates post rated themselves using the same pre-project likert scale. They also responded to six open ended reflective questions regarding their adapted book project including a question related to sharing their book with a child with a communication disability.

Data Collection and Findings**Quantitative**

Pre-service special education teacher candidates rated themselves on their teaching practices as they pertain to students with disabilities on a five-point likert rating scale (5 = very good; 1 = none) before and after participation in the adapted book project. Quantitative data were analyzed by statisticians in the university Math department. The pre-service special education candidates rated themselves high on the pre-test questions showing no significant gain when compared to their scored post-project responses to the likert scale.

Qualitative

Six open-ended, reflective questions replicated from a previous study by Johnson & Sheriff (2017) were asked concerning self-efficacy of the pre-service teacher candidates after completion of the adapted book project:

1. What did you know about adapting books prior to this book project?
2. After adapting your book how has your knowledge of book adaptation evolved?
3. Prior to the book adaptation project, what confidence did you have in your ability to meet the needs of students with disabilities using grade level typical books?
4. After adapting your book, how has your confidence in typical book adaptation evolved?
5. What influence do you think the adapted book project has had on your future classroom practices?
6. Describe your experience of sharing your adapted book with a child.

Responses to the the open ended, reflective questions indicated that the pre-service special education teacher candidates had gained specific insightful learning and knowledge for adapting books and working with young

students with disabilities within literacy instruction. A constant comparative data analysis technique developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was utilized to analyze the participating pre-service candidates' written reflective responses. Both phrases and words were color-coded and highlighted by the researchers from the written reflection responses of each candidate's submitted reflection paper. Notes were written on the respondents' papers and on the pages in their papers' margins. This aided in categorization of written response items that were determined related to one another. Color-coded highlighting of the reflective responses, key words, ideas, and similar concepts led to emerging categories. Titles were given describing linked items until no other categories or themes were found (Merriam, 1998). Two obvious themes correlating with the definition of self-efficacy emerged: knowledge and confidence.

Theme: Knowledge

When discussing questions concerning book adaptations, barriers to learning, and understanding, the theme of knowledge was repeated. The pre-service special education teacher candidates discussed their pre and post knowledge of book adaptations. They also wrote regarding their abilities to design and create future adapted books along with their understanding of how to address successful learning for their students with multiple types of disabilities, not just those with communication disabilities. Examples of the pre-service special education candidates' responses follow:

"I think my knowledge of book adaptation has evolved 100%. Going from not knowing about or ever seeing something of the nature before to being able to do it myself is a complete eye opener."

"I love knowing I have the capability to change anything to be what it needs to be for my kids and what a wonderful thing to be able to do!"

"I now have a great knowledge of what it takes to make a great adapted book my students. I find myself looking at books and trying to think of ways to adapt them to meet the needs of the students in my class. I have a better understanding of the way books can be adapted to help students learn the basic concepts of their learning objectives."

"My knowledge of adapting books is truly remarkable in the sense that there could be so much one on one involvement with the children. My knowledge is understanding that there are other ways to get a book read without just reading it in the normal way."

"After adapting my book, I have so many ideas of how I can adapt all kinds of materials to support any student that I might have."

"After adapting my book, my mind is running wild with possibilities! I understand now that adaptive books can be used for a multitude of children with a wide variety of learning disabilities."

"My eyes were opened to a whole new world of creativity. I enjoyed learning how to turn this book into a teachable useable work of art so to speak. It didn't take long to realize that book adaptation can be done with a number of books on many levels of reading and instruction."

Out of the twenty-six participants' responses, twenty-three (88%) contained the words understanding, learn/learned or know/knowledge. Many of the special education candidate

participants acknowledged in their answers that they did understand the idea of adaptation as it applied to making classroom learning activities, but most of the participants had not seen or adapted a typical book for a student with a communication disability. The qualitative data responses also revealed the pre-service special education participants did not understand some simple and easy ways to adapt typical books before they participated in the adapted project but expressed in writing their new knowledge and understanding of differentiating instruction via their own teacher-made adaptations for typical books.

Theme: Confidence

Twenty-four (92%) of the pre-service special education teacher candidates responded in writing of their increase in confidence level in working with young students with communication disabilities during literacy instruction. Examples of the pre-service special education candidates' responses follow:

"I have confidence in my ability to use more adaptive books, and other adaptive learning materials throughout the school year. I love making new things for my students that will make it easier for them to learn."

"My confidence level before this project was at about 50% and I can say now with confidence that I would rate my confidence level closer to an 80% when it comes to structuring materials to help fit the needs of my students. I feel like I have more faith in creating more useful techniques/materials. This experience has opened up my eyes and also my creativeness to allow for many more fun experiences in the future."

"After this book project, I feel completely confident in my abilities to adapt books for the needs of the children. I think that the adapted book project has only stretched the various practices I can/will implement in my classroom."

"Now that I have seen this idea and completed it on my own, I have gained confidence in doing it on my own with a different concept or goal in mind."

"My confidence for providing this new healthy form of teaching to my learners only reminds me of why I have desired to be a part of the force that supports students with disabilities. In my future classroom, I see myself with a library that enhances my teaching abilities through the usage of adapted books."

"I am excited to say that my confidence in adapting books has grown tremendously. I am really looking forward to creating other book projects that will be used to help students of all early grade levels and abilities."

"After adapting the book, I discovered I had more confidence in typical book adaptation. I started to view books differently...noticing ways I could adapt other books."

"My confidence in my level for the adapting of a book has changed significantly and I am just amazed how much I have grown as an individual."

Research participant written responses revealed that the candidates learned reasons and ways to adapt typical general curriculum books as a part of their literacy instruction for young students with communication disabilities. Many had not considered that they would be responsible for helping students with communication disabilities be able to access general preschool literacy curriculum, but post project responses reveal most all now feel confident in being able to successfully find ways to achieve future students in ECSE

programming access to literacy concepts in typical books.

Limitations

This research study took place in one online undergraduate senior level early childhood special education (ECSE) college course involving 26 special education pre-service teacher candidates. Extending the research project over several course sections with special education pre-service candidates could lead to additional data supporting efficacy regarding support for little ones with communication disabilities achieving access to general curriculum text material. It might also be relevant to separate data between non-traditional students working as para-professionals within the field and typical undergraduate students not working in the field of special education while taking their college coursework.

Discussion and Conclusions

The quantitative survey did not result in positive increase in learning. One potential idea for this lack of positive increase in results is that those working in classrooms as para-professionals did not know what that they did not know. They perhaps felt they had already seen adapted materials and scored themselves high on the pre-test resulting in no significant post survey results when they scored themselves after their research participation.

The results from the qualitative data collected in this study suggest that the adapted book project increased pre-service special education teacher candidates' attitudes of confidence and their self-efficacy in teaching access to the general education literacy curriculum to little students with communication disabilities. One implication for the future could be to repeat the adaptive book research project across several university campuses and to distinguish between non-traditional students working as special education para-professionals from those undergraduate students not employed within the field of special education.

Determining that special education pre-service teacher candidates can increase self-efficacy beliefs through book adaptations for young students with communication disabilities may increase motivation and alleviate apprehensions they have about supporting young children with communication disabilities in achieving access to the general curriculum. Young students with communication disabilities are increasingly included in general education classrooms. Special education teacher knowledge and confidence in meeting their educational access to the general literacy curriculum is an important part of advocating, planning, differentiating, and adapting student instructional materials. Federal and state law mandates students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum. Training pre-service special education teacher candidates reasons for and ways to adapt and share instructional materials with young children with communication disabilities is important in that it can lead to supporting access to the general literacy curriculum.

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