Changing Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions of Disability Through Simulation Experiences

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Introduction
Historically, inclusion has not been successful for all students with disabilities, which may be due to a lack of appropriate teacher training or buy-in (Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 2012). Past experiences, personal beliefs, and values, across a myriad of educational contexts, are strong determinants of physical education teacher decisions and actions and consistently impact the choice of content, instructional approaches, and implementation of curricula (McMahon & MacPhail, 2007; Stran & Curtner-Smith, 2009). Pre-service teacher’s (PTs) practices can often be traced back to prior experiences and relationships which have shaped their beliefs and philosophies about teaching and learning (Smith & Schmidt, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact a simulated disability field experience had on preservice teachers’ perceptions of individuals with disabilities and to what extent that experience impacted their values and beliefs about teaching students with disabilities.

Method
• Participants: 10 undergraduate PTs (2 female; 8 male) enrolled in an adapted physical education course.
• Procedures: PTs completed two pre/post reflective writing assignments about perceptions of disability, attended a professional sporting event with a standing companion while using a lightweight sports wheelchair, and participated in a focus group interview.
• Approach/Analysis: Interpretivism - Narrative Inquiry to investigate “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p.58), thematically analyzed and peer debriefed (Culver, Gilbert, & Trudel, 2003).

Results
Despite their previous experiences, participant’s perceptions of individuals with disabilities were positively impacted by the simulation experience.

Major Themes

Perceived Impact on Teaching Students with Disabilities

Perceived Treatment

Perceived Mobility/Accessibility Challenges

Changes in Perceptions of Individuals with Disabilities

Meta-Perceptions

I felt like most people just felt sorry for me...a lot of pity smiles and head tilts. It wasn’t just like a nice smile...they would shrug their shoulders and tilt their head. I felt like everybody was just like, oh poor girl, that’s sad - that must suck. So you can definitely tell that’s what they were thinking.

When we left, the valet saw me wheeling out. They were like, “hey we need their car now!” and there were at least ten people ahead of us, but they gave us special treatment. They brought my car right up, and we didn’t have to wait at all.

They brought my car right up, they gave us...they...in a wheelchair...even though I was only in it for three hours. I think I know now what it’s like to be in a chair or disabled in a sense.

I never really noticed the ramp. I had to slow down because it’s pretty steep. I was like, I don’t really want to go up that ramp more than I have to, because I realized how steep it was. I was so nervous. It took a lot for me to get all the way up there.

“Being in this experience, I think perceiving them differently. Being able to not judge them or stare at them. You kind of know what it’s like being in a wheelchair...even though I was only in it for three hours. I think I know now what it’s like to be in a chair or disabled in a sense.”

Conclusion
Results of this study suggest the need for PETE programs to include courses and authentic (and unique) disability simulation experiences which equip preservice teachers with the awareness and ability to teach inclusive physical education.

The more confident and proficient preservice teachers feel, the more likely that students with disabilities will receive appropriate and meaningful physical education instruction.

If preservice teachers have previous personal experiences with disability, they may feel more capable of appropriately including students with disabilities in their physical education classes.

Selected References

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