

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at EMU

Volume 1 *Toward Transformation: EMU Faculty
Journey into the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*

Article 6

9-28-2009

Practice Teaching in Urban Schools: The Effectiveness of Special Education Preclinical Experience in Urban School Settings

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Recommended Citation

Koh, Myung-sook (2007) "Practice Teaching in Urban Schools: The Effectiveness of Special Education Preclinical Experience in Urban School Settings," *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at EMU*: Vol. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <http://commons.emich.edu/sotl/vol1/iss1/6>

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PRACTICE TEACHING IN URBAN SCHOOLS: THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PRECLINICAL EXPERIENCE IN URBAN SCHOOL SETTINGS

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Myung-sook Koh's contribution to this volume wrestles with an important issue in teacher education. Teacher education students at Eastern Michigan University get very little, if any, experience teaching in urban schools; furthermore, students not majoring in special education rarely gain direct experience working with this population, although the inclusive classrooms they will face as teachers likely will present them with special education students. This chapter details Myung-sook's work in getting her students into inner city schools as part of their field experience as preservice teachers, and examines student reactions to this important activity.

At the core of this project, of course, is listening to students. Myung-sook Koh's work reminds us that if our ultimate goal is to affect student learning and help students grow, the best approach is to listen to the students tell us what they have learned, and how they have grown. This paper does an especially strong job in expressing student learning in the student's voice.

Urban schools consist of a high rate of students at risk, such as students from low socio-economic status and broken families, and linguistically and culturally diverse families. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 indicated that only 35 percent of fourth graders in urban schools could read at their own grade level. Also, urban schools' drop-out rates were much higher than those of non-urban schools.

According to Heward's (2004) analysis, many urban schools were at-risk schools with at-risk children. They were usually ill-equipped, overcrowded, and in desperate need of renovation. Teachers in urban schools were likely to be alienated from students, to provide low standards and quality of education and to have lower expectations for some students. Teachers were also unlikely to be responsive to students compared with suburban teachers. These schools had high truancy and disciplinary problems, often with physical attacks on students and school personnel. Students were likely to skip school at least one day a month.

Urban schools are rarely attractive places for beginning teachers to start their teaching careers. As a result, they have difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers. According to Neville, Sherman, and Cohen (2005), one-third of teachers who began their first teaching job in these high poverty schools resigned their jobs. As a result, urban school districts have more uncertified and under-qualified teachers who are less experienced and not trained enough in teacher preparation programs (Chester and Beaudin 1996; Darling-Hammond 1990) despite the fact that teacher quality is the most vital factor in improving student performance. The NCLB required schools, districts, and states to have "highly qualified teachers" as well as 100% student proficiency in reading and mathematics by 2014; this is hard to achieve for these schools (Neville, Sherman and Cohen 2005).

Teacher preparation programs have the potential to help preservice teachers develop more knowledge and skills, enabling them to meet the challenges they face in their classrooms. However, the traditional teacher preparation program has failed to produce the level of quality demanded by the urban educational environment (Heward 2004; Neville, Sherman and Cohen 2005). Preservice teachers must be given the opportunity to acquire the appropriate field experiences

and knowledge necessary to understand the characteristics of students from low socio-economic status and different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Ideally, field experience provides opportunities for preservice teachers to observe classroom teachers and to apply pedagogical and theoretical knowledge (Sears, Cavallaro and Hall 2004). In spite of more frequent field experience requirements, a body of research has shown that preservice teachers did not feel they were provided with sufficient opportunities to observe and work in real classrooms. In addition, educators often felt that they lacked the necessary skills to manage children with special needs, disadvantages, or multicultural backgrounds in their classrooms before they went out to teach in the real world (Croll and Shank 1983; Garmon 2004).

Studies have indicated the importance of early field experiences in helping teachers prepare to work with diverse populations (Bullough 1989; Grant and Secada 1990). Bullough (1989) suggests that early field experiences should be combined with reflection to encourage students to begin to take the perspective of a classroom teacher. The main purpose of such a field experience was to provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical hands-on experience and to think differently about their responsibility for educating students with diverse special needs and underprivileged multicultural backgrounds (Weaver and Landers 1996). Ample field experience combined with opportunities for reflection is essential for preservice teachers who did not have previous experiences with urban school students and special education populations.

Based on this previous research, it is crucial to investigate the impact of preservice teachers' early preclinical experience on their preparation to provide an appropriate education for students with disabilities and at-risk students in urban schools. The proper training in an urban setting may make preservice teachers feel more comfortable working in urban schools and allow urban schools to recruit more highly-qualified teachers. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of such early field experience and to see how it actually affects their perspective on teaching in urban schools. Specifically, the study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How were preservice teachers' perspectives regarding children with special needs in urban schools changed after the preclinical experience?
2. What impact did the field experience have on preservice teachers' understanding special education children and children in urban schools?
3. How did this preclinical experience prepare preservice teachers for teaching students with special needs in inclusive classrooms and in urban schools?
4. How did preservice teachers feel about special education services being provided to students in urban schools?
5. Are there any differences in preferences for teaching in urban schools before and after this experience?

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were 56 general and special education preservice teachers who enrolled in the Education of Students with Exceptionalities class at Eastern Michigan University. Participants were volunteers who rendered a written consent before responding to written interview questionnaires.

All education majors in the teacher preparation program are required to take only one introductory course in special education, without any preclinical experience components. However, the students in this study did a ten-hour preclinical experience in a special education setting in an urban school. This introductory course provides basic information on special education, different types of disabilities, legislation, cross-categorical perspectives, curricular and instructional modifications, family issues and teacher collaboration models.

Among the study participants, 78% are general education teacher candidates and 22% are special education candidates. Approximately 42% of participants had no previous experience related to children with disabilities before taking this class. For all of the participants but two, this was the first special education course. Detailed demographic data on participants in the study is found in Table 4-1.

Table 4-1: Demographic Information for 56 Students in the Study

| Items | Percentages |
|--|-------------|
| Endorsement in Teacher Education Program | 34% |
| Elementary | 37% |
| Secondary | 1% |
| Early Childhood | 6% |
| Others: Adapted PE and Music Education | 22% |
| Special Education | |
| Previous Experience | 19% |
| Job-related or classroom teaching | 22% |
| Preclinical experience or volunteering | 17% |
| Family members or own experiences | 42% |
| None | |
| Special Education Courses Taken | 96% |
| This is the first one | 4% |
| This is the second one | |

Measures

To measure the effectiveness of special education preclinical experience in urban schools and the impact on preservice general and special education teachers' perspectives regarding teaching students in urban schools, two instruments were used: Pre- and Post-Reflective Field Experience Questionnaires. These questionnaires were designed for qualitative study. The author developed the reflective questions and collaborated with two other researchers in reviewing, discussing, and revising them until all agreed to the final form. The Pre-Reflective questionnaire consists of six questions to measure students' basic knowledge of urban schools and their perspectives on having preclinical experiences and teaching children in urban schools; it also has five demographic items. The Post-Reflective Questionnaire consists of 10 questions to measure the effectiveness and the impact of this urban school special education experience.

Procedures

Preservice teacher participants in two sections of Education of Students with Exceptionalities were asked to complete the ten hours preclinical experience in special education settings and in urban schools. This field experience was necessary because all preservice teachers should be prepared to serve a wide variety of students with diverse needs that include those with various disabilities, exceptionalities, at-risk students, single parents, broken families, and cultural and linguistic diversity.

This ten-hour urban school special education preclinical experience was the only guaranteed opportunity for these preservice teachers to observe and participate with accomplished teachers and gain experience with special education populations. While preservice teachers complete other preclinical experiences, placements with students with disabilities are typically not selected.

For a student to do the placement in a school, the school had to have at least 50% minority students and 70% receiving free or reduced price lunches. Participants were not assigned to a certain school, but had to find their own classroom. At the first class, participants were given the Field Experience Manuals developed by the author. This manual included an Introduction; Protocol to Use When Visiting Schools; Role of Classroom Teachers; Policy Statement on Student Involvement in Physical Management; a Field Placement Information Form; a Log; a Pre-Reflective Questionnaire; a Post-Reflective Questionnaire; a Classroom Teacher Evaluation; an Assessing the Instructional Environment Checklist; a Language Checklist; a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) Checklist; and an ADD/ADHD Criteria Checklist. The pre-reflective questionnaire was collected before their field experience began. At the end of semester, students submitted the Field Experience Folder which included the completed Field Placement Information form; Log; Post-Reflective Essay; Classroom Teacher Evaluation; Language Checklist; FBA checklist; ADHD Criteria checklist; and Assessing the Instructional Environment Checklist.

Participants were strongly urged to do both observations and hands-on experience in their setting, but only observation was required. Preservice teachers recorded their field experience hours in

the log provided. At the first class, participants were asked to fill out the Pre-Reflective Field Experience questionnaire regardless of whether they agree to participate in this study. They filled out the Assessing the Instructional Environment Checklist while in the special education classroom and wrote the Post-Reflective Essay, guided by question items that were developed based on the research questions, after their final visit.

Data Analysis

The 56 responses to the pre- and post-reflective questionnaires were examined using content analysis. Two researchers initially broke down the raw text into discrete conceptual categories that identify a particular phenomenon. These categories were systematically linked to causal conditions, context, action/interaction strategies, and consequently were used to determine emergent themes (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

The emergent themes were enumerated in the number of responses and reported using descriptive statistics; 56% indicates that that percentage of participants responded to that theme. The responses to the questions were not mutually exclusive. Most participants provided more than one theme; thus, the total percentages of responses on each main theme exceeds 100%.

Reliability of ratings was established by consensus (Hill, Thompson and Williams 1997). Raters met periodically to determine their degree of consensus. A third rater (an EMU faculty member) was consulted when disagreements occurred. Responses to the pre- and post-reflective questions were analyzed based on each research question. Table 4-2 shows how the research questions and the reflective questions were matched.

Results

Perceptions of Urban Schools

The participants' perception on the urban schools was measured before and after their preclinical experience to see if there were any changes based upon this experience. Before the participants went

to the urban schools, they wrote that urban schools had children from low socio-economic environments, high rates of free and reduced lunches, and many low income families (65%); high minority rates (53%); lack of funding, lack of resources and materials, lack of modern

Table 4-2: Matched Research Questions and Reflective Questions

| Research Questions | Reflective Questions |
|--|---|
| 1. How were preservice teachers' perspectives regarding children with special needs in urban schools changed after the preclinical experience? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe overall insights you gained as a result of this experience. • What are the characteristics of urban schools? • Describe any other insights you gained as a result of this experience. |
| 2. What impact did the field experience have on preservice teachers' understanding of children with special education and children in urban schools? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the experience affect your understanding of urban schools and individuals with disabilities? |
| 3. How did this preclinical experience prepare preservice teachers for teaching students with special needs in inclusive classroom and in urban schools? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you think this field experience prepared you for teaching students in urban schools and students with special needs? • What impact do you think this experience will have on you as a general education classroom teacher? • In order to teach students with disabilities what strategies do you think you need to practice after field experience? |
| 4. How did preservice teachers evaluate special education services in urban schools? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the experience affect your understanding of how students with disabilities are served in urban school settings? • Do you think children with special needs were provided adequate services for their special needs in urban schools? |
| 5. Are there any differences in preferences in teaching in urban schools before and after this experience? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you planning to teach in an inner city school? Why? |

technologies, and poor school facilities (51%); high rate of violence and behavior problems (29%); high student/teacher ratio (16%); low parental support and school involvement, family issues, low parent educational levels, and less caring parents (14%); and students demonstrating low academic achievement (11%). Many participants confessed that they had never stepped into the urban areas; thus, their response was based on perceptions from the media. The following are examples of comments participants made about urban schools:

The only interaction I have had with an inner city school is what is portrayed on television...

What come to mind are the things that you hear about on the news everyday.

I've never attended an inner city school, but when the name is brought up I think of hard to deal with children...

While not having direct experience with inner city schools, I would say that they are under funded and oftentimes have parents who do not care about their children's education...

The media says the education is not very good. Poverty is also a characteristic that is associated with urban city schools.

After participants had the preclinical experience in urban schools, their perception of urban schools was not changed much; descriptions did, however, become more detailed and much longer, with specific examples. Most of the participants reported that the urban school was different than what they thought or imagined. The following themes were extracted from the responses: lack of funding, lack of resources and materials, lack of modern technologies and facilities, and outdated books (53%); low SES neighborhood, high free/reduced

lunches, low income families, horrible living conditions, and many single parents or relative guardians (49%); high minority rates (49%); violence, rough neighborhood, more behavior problems, and a great amount of security systems like metal detectors and police officers in every hallway (24%); high student/teacher ratio (9%); low parental support and involvement and less caring parents (9%); low academic achievement and academically neglected children (6%); more special education students (6%); and good teachers and positive environment (6%). The following quotes represent the main perceptions:

Having grown up in a white, suburban community, I was sheltered in how I thought schools were run. I had one narrow perspective. After being in this urban school, I feel that my eyes were opened to a whole new kind of school.

... many of the students did not have food at their homes and often times do not want to leave school for breaks because there is no heat at home either. The students I observed were more prone to act out when frustrated, but I am not sure if that is a characteristic of the environment or of their having special needs.

It lacked terribly in posters and color. The room gave off an unclean and disorganized feel, which I sensed right as I walked into the classroom. In the middle of the classroom was what looked like a "play area," carpet on the floor and tents to lay in. This was not something I would feel comfortable putting in my classroom.... plenty of the walls were bare, and the small speech room was filled with old toys and a messy desk. I was not impressed with what an urban school looked like.

One of the largest and most obvious characteristics though is the focus on discipline. Guards are posted at every exit and every hall; police patrol the entire

school grounds and in two cases chased students through the school with their hands on their guns. I would say the school itself was a burden on the children and they need to make enormous changes if they ever want to start to see positive change.

There were a lot of kids with a bad background. For some of the kids, school is an escape from a bad home life. There were also kids that came from being in jail. They were placed in the special education setting because they missed so much schooling from being locked up in a youth home or jail. In the urban setting the kids taught me a new word, “pounding,” which means the radio is very loud.

... overcrowded because schools receive less and less funding.

All together it appeared to be a less formal, less professional setting. Each time all staff was wearing jeans and casual wear, and the children called their teacher and aides by their first names.

... in many of these extremely poor households the parents don't want to see their kids obtain higher levels of education because they didn't make it through high school. It is because of this thinking that you can see why the cycle of poverty never stops.

Perceptions on Being Assigned in Urban Special Education Settings

Before being assigned in special education settings, 69% of participants reported they were excited. Among them, 19% were special education majors and expected to gain invaluable experience. Several participants said that:

... I have often wondered what a special education class is like so I will be interested in observing one.

I think that it is a good thing to be assigned to special education setting, it is preparing us for what we could be dealing with in the future as teachers. It's better to have some kind of knowledge about special education because there might be times we will experience it in our own classrooms and we will have better knowledge on how to provide the best education possible.

... every valid learning experience for me to get ready to teach different types of people is a worthwhile experience.

Approximately 31% of participants were nervous, overwhelmed and apprehensive because they had not yet had any experience with children with special needs. One participant said that she was a bit frightened and uncomfortable being assigned in special education setting because she was not familiar with the setting. On a more positive side, 65% of participants said they were excited and comfortable with this assignment. Among them, 13% noted that they had no problems with it because they were raised in and experienced in inner city areas. One participant said that going to an urban school is like going home for him. The following quotes represent their perceptions:

... it's important for future teachers to be exposed to all different types of schools because there is no guarantee as to where you will teach. It takes people out of their comfort zone.

... such an environment will perhaps challenge my idealism and give me a good dose of reality.

... students in a "disadvantaged" environment will especially need dedicated teachers.

Going to an urban school is like going home for me. I am a poor person and I grew up on free lunch so

going to an urban school is nothing new for me.

I would find the atmosphere to be very different from the kind that I grew up learning in. But even so I would do my best to help the students that found their way into my classroom receive the best education I could give them.

Even though more participants said they were comfortable being assigned in special education settings and urban schools, only 23% of participants said they did not have any concerns about this preclinical experience. Of the participants, 51% of preservice teachers were worried about their ability to do this project. They were concerned that they might not know what to do in the classroom when students asked for help. Several participants were worried that students might not accept and respect them as preservice teachers. This is demonstrated by the following:

I fear I will not be able to connect with the students or help the teacher if and when asked to.

... I want to be perceptive enough to notice the characteristics of the students I am observing.

How am I going to react to the students in a special education setting in an urban school, how am I going to change my perspective of teaching?

... I will feel uncomfortable and out of place in this unfamiliar setting.

Being able to know how to deal with the situations I am given, that's my big concern.

Finding an appropriate school and a good teacher from whom to learn different teaching techniques were concerns for 17% of the par-

ticipants. Approximately 12% of them were worried about the timing required to do this field experience as a full time student holding down a job. There were 8% of participants afraid to walk in the inner city neighborhood.

Impact on the Perspectives on the Preclinical Experience

After the preclinical experience, all of the participants expressed that this was a very positive and invaluable learning experience that they could not have learned from the textbook or classroom lectures. Several participants said that they were not initially happy with this assignment and did not expect to learn much, but they were wrong. The following two quotes demonstrated insights about this experience:

Truthfully, I was less than pleased when I found out we had to do observation hours for this class. Now that I have completed them, I know why we did them. This was probably one of the most rewarding experiences.

I felt that this assignment was very beneficial. Before this assignment all I knew about urban schools and students came from movies and newspaper articles, and nothing was positive. After this visitation I look at urban schools in a completely different way. Personally I am tremendously grateful for the opportunity to do this assignment because of all the valuable lessons I've obtained from it.

There were four main themes extracted from the responses: Learning Experience about Special Education (67%); Eye Opening Experience of Urban Children and Settings (19%); Opportunity to Confirm their Choice of the Teaching Profession (8%), and No Differences Noticed between Special Education and General Education Children (5%).

Learning Experience about Special Education

The majority of participants reported that this experience afforded opportunities to learn about the characteristics of children with special needs and how to approach and teach these children in the special education classroom. Approximately 65% said they learned about the characteristics of special education as a place of variety that contained different types of students who need different types of teaching and learning techniques.

To many participants, it was an eye opening experience about special education settings: what types of children were there and how difficult the special education teaching job was. Several participants saw that the special education teachers could do multiple tasks at the same time with multiple students interrupting to ask for their attention. Some participants said that it was very demanding and challenging area, but rewarding. Several expressed that through this experience, they became aware that children without any visible disabilities could have disabilities in learning. A few said that socioeconomic status was a better predictor of academic achievement than was a high quality teacher. The following quote gives one participant's insight on this experience:

This field experience gave me a hands-on opportunity to observe an actual classroom. I have gained a sense of humbleness, because so many of the children are very talented, yet aren't equipped with things that I may be blessed with. Some of the children were unclean, some possessed bad odors. Others could not read, and some were physically handicapped. I learned how to accept a student for who they are, not what they look like. I also learned that you can't judge a book by its cover because the children who didn't look so pleasant on the outside were extremely talented within their academics.

Approximately one-fourth of the respondents stated that they learned how to teach and approach children with special needs. They have gained a great appreciation and respect for the special education

teachers, learned to be very organized and able to adapt to any situation, and learned that the environment the child lived in played a big role in the child's academics. Most importantly, several participants recognized how important effective classroom management skills were in special education settings in urban schools.

Eye Opening Experience about Urban School Environment

Participants noted this field experience gave them a tremendous opportunity to see the reality of urban schooling. They observed what was going on in special education settings and urban schools. A few participants confessed that this experience gave them insights into how they were lucky being raised in a blessed environment compared to the children living in this environment. The following quotes showed the overall insights that two participants had:

I have never stepped foot in an inner [city] school before this experience. It was different in so many ways, compared to what I am used to. I attended mostly private institutions for the entirety of my education. The faculty was outstanding... this school was lacking of supplies. ... I could not believe these teachers were given such old material to work with. This is when I saw the different between a suburban school and an inner[city] school. I noticed plenty of the children did not come to school on a regular basis, due to poor parenting. While I observed some of the girls had manicured nails, some had trouble reading and remembering certain letter sounds. Mrs. A always remained calm and collected while kids struggled with counting money and counting by fives. I was so impressed with her teaching skills. I was able to observe Mrs. B. I was less impressed with her quality in teaching. This certain teacher had to come back from retirement in order to fill this position, and made it pretty clear she was not happy being there. The room was a mess, not decorated, and the board

games (speech games) were old and did not allow the kids to stay entertained while learning.

The biggest impact from this experience was the shock factor for myself. I had never been in a school such as [this one] before this assignment. I never knew how much I stereotyped an urban school and was shocked to see the real thing. I think overall the students are like any other children but in most of their cases they haven't had as many opportunities as other children at their age.

Opportunity to Confirm their Choice of the Teaching Profession

Through this field experience, some participants were excited to find that the teaching profession was right for them. They felt comfortable being in the classroom and felt great being able to inspire children. One participant showed her deep insight into this experience:

I got a strong feeling that I am definitely going into the right profession. I am in love with the classroom but still very afraid of standing alone in front of 25 young children. This was my first experience stepping into an elementary school since I decided I wanted to be a teacher, it was a little frightening. After an hour of sitting with the Special Education teacher, I felt more and more comfortable. It wasn't too long before he had me working one on one with a few of his students; that was even more frightening! I mean, helping a child you have never met understand something new really challenges your ability to open up quickly. I had to get over my own shyness in a matter of a few seconds, I had no time to warm up and let it sink in. I was right there next to that student and he was looking up at me with a blank stare, wondering who I am and what I'm about to do.

One participant found her limit through this experience:

While I have experience working with children of all ages and backgrounds, I find that my limits would be maxed out in such an environment. [The teacher] who although I respected, appeared very burned out after being there for approximately 10 years, and that is an image that will be with me for some time. I have a great deal of respect for those teachers able to do such work, but also recognize my limits.

Impact on Understanding Children with Special Needs in Urban Schools

The participants found they needed good strategies for how to teach children in urban schools and children with special needs. Even for participants who grew up in inner cities and attended urban schools, this was a brand new experience. Five main themes were extracted under this topic: Techniques of How to Teach Children with Special Needs (36%); Children with Special Needs in Dysfunctional Learning Environments (13%); Not Much Differences Between General and Special Education Children (13%); Lack of Parental Support and Involvement (11%); and No Impact on Understanding (7%).

Techniques of How to Teach Children with Special Needs

This experience influenced preservice teachers' understanding of techniques for how to teach children with special needs. They observed that there were different techniques for teaching children with different disabilities such as ADHD, autism, and cognitive impairment. Children with disabilities looked the same, but their educational needs were different. One participant said, "It prepared me for the unexpected situation. I am not lying to myself saying I'm ready for anything, but I do have a better picture of what's out there." Several noted they understood what their future inclusive classroom would be like.

Children with Special Needs in Dysfunctional Learning Environments

The preservice teachers came to understand how dysfunctional

learning environments could affect children with special needs. They noticed that children with special needs needed more resources and help, but their learning environment did not meet their needs because the lack of funding in urban schools did not allow the schools to provide appropriate special education services. As a preservice teacher noted, “Tense and gloomy environments were not supporting much children’s learning.... Promoting a safe and comfortable atmosphere with short and intense periods of learning combined with reiterating will affect children with special needs.”

Lack of Parental Support and Involvement

The preservice teachers understood how the home environment could affect the children’s learning and cause children to have behavior and academic problems. Lack of parental support, involvement and poor parenting skills could tremendously affect children’s learning. A participant noted, “Urban setting, you need to listen to your students to understand their background.... Need to be aware of their home life: School is better than home. Some children don’t want to go home.” Several participants said that they must be prepared that it would not be easy to contact parents. They knew to expect difficulty in communicating with parents if they planned to teach in an urban school in the future.

Some participants reported that because they were raised in urban settings, this experience did not affect their understanding of urban schools much. However, it influenced their understanding of children with disabilities because they hadn’t had any experiences in special education settings before.

The Level of Special Education Services in Urban Schools

The majority (63%) of preservice teachers believed that children with special needs in urban schools received adequate services for their educational needs, while 27% of them did not think the special education service in urban school was adequate. Thirty-seven percent of the participants gave credit to special education teachers for meeting needs adequately. They noted that the special education teacher did their best to provide special education services in inferior environ-

ments. One participant stated, “Even though resources are limited the teachers were creative and most helpful to each student. I believe that just because the environment is urban each student with a disability can be served with the proper education and materials as long as the teacher is adapting to the environment and has a love for teaching.”

Approximately one-fourth of the preservice teachers reported that children with special needs in urban schools did not receive adequate special education services because of lack of funding. Most mentioned limited special education services due to the shortage of special education professionals. Also, several participants reported that many students needed special education services, but could not receive them because of a long waiting list for special education evaluation. One participant expressed her observation as follows:

It is now crystal clear that urban school settings do a horrible job of serving the majority of their students with disabilities. For example, the students that I observed are not academically proficient in English, but they receive less than an hour of bilingual education a week. As a result, these students make almost no progress in the general education classroom because they have no idea of how to make connections between their native language (Spanish) and their secondary language (English). Furthermore, urban teachers do not educate students with EBD [Emotional Behavioral Disability] appropriately because they interpret their behavior as something that they can control. So instead of receiving treatment, they get suspended from school.

Twelve percent said it was because of the lack of effective and devoted teachers. The schedule of each day was very simple and repetitive and they spent most of the instructional time on games and specials, as the following shows:

I have never been in a classroom or around children

with disabilities but from this experience I got to understand what a school day consists of for them. They don't spend the day learning subject after subject. They did their reading, practiced their letters and numbers and the rest of the day was eating or free time. To me, I was kind of surprised just because in a normal classroom the only free time is recess.

The Impact on Preparation for Teaching in the Inclusive Classroom

Less than half of the preservice teachers said that they learned how to teach special education children in their future inclusive classroom through this field experience. Forty-six percent learned what educational needs special education children had; it made them see the skills they needed to practice before they went out to teach. Approximately 48% of participants observed the critical methods to teach special education children. Several participants also felt that the collaboration skill was critical to teach in inclusive classrooms.

Understood the Educational Needs of Children with Special Needs

Through this eye-opening experience, preservice teachers recognized what to expect in their future classrooms. They observed that most of children's home lives are tough and not stable and that it impacts learning. Since they could not expect parental support, such that learning happened only in school, they felt that they needed to learn a lot of teaching strategies.

Learned the Methods to Teach Special Education Children

While in the special education classroom in urban schools, the preservice teachers observed good techniques to teach children with disabilities and with urban issues. They also recognized that they needed to learn specific strategies and practices to teach these children. The skills they thought they needed to learn were Patience (58%); Classroom and Behavior Management (44%); Lesson Modification and Differentiated Instruction (22%); Learn about Disabilities More by Studying and Having More Field Experiences in Special Education Settings (32%); and Communication Skills and Interaction with Chil-

dren (14%). Finally, the participants recognized that teaching children with special needs required a lot of collaboration among professionals. They felt that they needed to practice working with special education teachers and to enhance communication skills between professionals.

Preferences for Teaching in Urban Schools

The preferences for teaching in urban schools were measured twice, before and after this preclinical experience. Before the preclinical experience, 46% of preservice teachers were positive about teaching in urban schools, but after the preclinical experience, more preservice teachers (69%) said that they would teach in urban schools if there was a job offer from an urban school (see Table 4-3). The following quotes speak to this point:

I am not necessarily planning to teach in an inner city school, but thanks to this experience, I would now consider it. I wouldn't have considered it before. This experience has decreased my fears of not fitting in to such a school by a lot, and on top of that, I now have a very positive experience that I associate with urban schools.

Before this field experience, I was not considering working in an urban school because truthfully, I was fearful. It was putting myself in a setting in which I knew not what to expect. After the experience, I would be more than willing to work in an urban school because I feel as if I could make more of a difference there than in a privileged white school.

Table 4-3: Preferences for Teaching in Urban Schools (n=56)

| Before Experience | After Experience |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 46%: Yes • 28%: No • 24%: Not Sure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 69%: Yes • 21%: No • 6%: planning to teach out of state or in rural areas |

At the beginning, 24% of participants were not sure if they would teach in urban schools because they did not have any ideas about urban schools. At the end, a lesser number of preservice teachers (21%) felt negative about teaching in urban schools than before this experience (28%). The reasons why they decided not to teach in urban schools were because they felt they could not handle dealing with the urban abusive parents nor did they think they had strong discipline skills needed to control an inner city classroom. In addition, they did not believe they could teach without sufficient funds and in the face of the other obstacles they might have in educating the students. The following are some examples of why these preservice teachers did not intend to teach in urban settings:

I personally do not wish to teach in an inner city school. I feel that it takes someone with a very strong personality to be able to do this, and I can admit that I do not have that personality. I would prefer to spend more time teaching than disciplining. I am glad I had this experience before I began teaching. I never really thought about whether or not I was going to teach in inner-city schools. After being in one, I know it is not something I am interested in.

... it would be hard for me to teach if I can't get ahold of parents and have no way of communicating with them, you get that more in an inner city school.

I am not planning on teaching in an inner-city school and am not sure if I would ever teach in an inner-city school. I think that if that is where I end up I will do my best but I am the type of person who likes to be close to where I work and I would not want to live in the inner-city. I think that as a white person I would not feel comfortable living in the inner city especially at first. I also would not be able to relate to the students in the inner city as well as I could relate to stu-

dents who are more like me, which is something that would make my teaching less effective.

Among these people, one-fifth of them already planned to teach in a certain place, like their hometown, the school they graduated from, or rural areas because they did not want to live in a big city.

Discussion

To the vast majority (78%) of preservice teachers who participated in this study, this course was their first and only special education course in their program. Even though more than 50% of participants had some previous experience with children with special needs, most did not have classroom experience in urban schools. To the previous urban school attendees (13%), this urban school experience was not a new one, but the special education experience was.

Much research has indicated that the ethnic and cultural differences between teachers and students could negatively affect children's school education (Chester and Beaudin 1996; Darling-Hammond 1990). This study showed that there was a huge gap between two parties: approximately 90% of participants were white Caucasian preservice teachers and have never stepped into the inner city school areas. Their knowledge of urban schools comes from the media and other sources, not from direct experience. As many preservice teachers confessed, it was a totally different world to them. They reflected on their childhood and appreciated what they had by observing the young children's lives in urban schools. They discovered how the school's lack of funding could affect children's education. The new things they experienced were the security systems: it gave them a reality check on how much violence and behavior problems the urban schools had.

Surprisingly, even though they did not have any direct experience in urban settings and special education classrooms, the majority of preservice teachers were not apprehensive by being assigned in both settings and their attitudes were very positive, with some showing a strong passion. However, with the high expectation for the preclinical experience, the vast majority were concerned about their capability to

do well with it. The main concerns were from anxiety about inexperience in settings and with children with special needs.

The majority of preservice teachers had eye opening experience about special education settings and about urban children. They observed both positive and negative aspects of special education teachers' teaching and managing children with special needs. They observed that many special education teachers provided effective teaching through their creativity despite limited resources. The main thing they observed in special education settings was that children had individual differences with different issues and educational needs. To participants inexperienced in working with children with special needs, it was the opportunity to recognize children with invisible disabilities like learning disabilities.

As expected, most of the preservice teachers acknowledged the important issues in the urban schools. The preservice teachers recognized how dysfunctional home and school environments could negatively influence the children's education. As Heward (2004) suggested, this study reinforced that a dysfunctional educational environment could be the result of limited school funding and ineffective instruction from teachers.

However, the main perception about the urban school and its children were that regardless of their underprivileged environment, children were just children who deserved a good teacher and good instruction. They noticed that children in urban settings needed a richer educational environment and more structured and sequenced instruction to make up for their limited support from the home environment. To provide effective instruction, preservice teachers felt that they needed to practice teaching techniques for their future teaching in inclusive classrooms which might include children from this dysfunctional environment and/or with special needs. In addition, they found that teaching children with special needs was motivating and rewarding even though burnout and fatigue existed.

The preservice teachers thought that children were not provided wonderful services to meet the children's educational needs, but were provided adequate services even though there was a lack of resources. More preservice teachers gave the credit to the special

education teachers for their incredible jobs regardless of the limited amount of materials and equipments. One important finding was that many children potentially needed special education, but could not have it because of delayed eligibility evaluation as a result of the limited number of professionals to do the assessment.

Through this eye opening preclinical experience, many pre-service teachers recognized skills they needed to practice while they were in the teacher preparation program. They found that patience was the most important skill needed to teach children with different educational needs. They were usually slow learners and they recognized that without patience, they could not provide step by step instruction to meet the children's slow learning pace. Classroom management and behavior management was important for them to control those children who displayed acting out behaviors. They emphasized how important it was to gain respect from children and to be an authority figure to teach in urban schools. In addition, many preservice teachers recognized the critical role of a special education teacher and how a general education teacher needs to collaborate with special education teachers.

There were significant differences in their preferences for teaching in urban schools before and after their preclinical experience. In addition, they gave their exact reasons why they would and would not teach in urban schools compared to their feeling before this experience. This preclinical teaching experience provided them with opportunities to observe urban special education settings and reflect on their profession; they could adjust their teaching preferences based on their real experiences. It is important to note that the many preservice teachers did not believe they could teach without parental support or proper resources.

Limitations of this Study

There were several limitations to this study. First of all, an obvious limitation was that it relied on only preservice teachers' self-reported data that might be subjective opinions rather than objective points of view. Some participants might do these field experiences in the same schools even though they did not stay in the same classroom.

In this case, their reports may be on the same school and overlapped information. The results were based on the limited mid-western area. It might show different results if the data were collected in other areas of the United States. In addition, if schools and teachers were pre-selected, the results might be different. There might be a possibility that the participants provided what they thought I wanted to hear because I was their instructor or they were giving what they perceived as the socially acceptable answer for their teaching preferences. The essays, however, did provide a strong opportunity for students to explore the rationale behind their feelings.

Conclusion

Urban schools have a tough task recruiting and retaining well-qualified teachers. Inexperienced first year teachers in urban environments often struggle through the year and resign their position thereafter. To aid in recruiting and retaining well-qualified teachers, this preclinical experience gave future educators the opportunity to acquire an invaluable field experience. Through this rich experience in urban schools and special education classrooms, they became aware of the issues in urban schools and special education. This preclinical experience gave them insights about what to prepare for and what to expect in their future teaching in inclusive classrooms. This experience influenced preferences for teaching in urban schools. Preservice teachers gained sufficient opportunities to observe and work in a real classroom and know what they would face if they elected to teach in urban schools in the future.

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