

The Impact of Field Experiences on Pre-service Teachers' Decisions Regarding Special Education Certification

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Abstract

Across the United States, there is a continuing shortage of special education teachers. As a result, institutions of higher education must prepare a sufficient number of highly qualified special educators to meet the needs of students with disabilities. One necessary component of teacher preparation programs is the field-based experience which allows prospective teachers to practice what they have learned in their academic coursework. This qualitative case study examined the relationship between field-based experiences and pre-service teachers' decisions related to obtaining a special education certification. Using an open-ended survey, 55 pre-service teachers from one regional four-year university reported that economics and employability were major factors impacting their decision to become certified in special education. In addition, the context of the field experience including time, setting, and teachers, impacted the pre-service teachers' decisions related to field experiences, both positively and negatively. Recommendations include increasing the amount of time spent in special education classrooms, providing students with improved classroom strategies for working with diverse learners, increasing training in positive behavior intervention techniques, and providing additional opportunities to participate in Individual Education Placement (IEP) writing activities.

Keywords: certification, decision making, field experience, pre-service teachers, special education

1. Introduction

There is little disagreement that schools across the United States are experiencing a chronic and pervasive shortage of special education teachers (Tyler & Bruner, 2014; TEA, 2013; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005). This shortage is attributed to an insufficient supply of personnel with the necessary credentials required to teach students with disabilities. The challenge for teacher preparation programs is to ensure that graduating students have the knowledge and skills to be effective teachers from the first day of employment and that they remain in the profession (Casey, Dunlap, Brister, Davidson, & Martin, 2011). Kozleski, Mainzer, Deshler, and Coleman (2000) reported that "four out of every ten entering special educators have left before their fifth year" and recommended that "future teacher preparation fill the void by training a sufficient numbers of teachers in special education" (p. 5).

According to Huling (1998) prior to the 1980s, the leading model for U.S. teacher preparation consisted of course work on a university campus followed by one semester of student teaching.

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Today, higher education programs have a number of options regarding field experiences, which provide pre-service special educators with opportunities to engage in various types of knowledge through coursework, mentoring, and applying knowledge to practice. However, there is little research focusing on the specific needs of novice special education teachers from these widely varying preparation programs. Prater and Sileo's (2004) study, examining the field experience requirements in special education teacher preparation, recommended further research on the qualitative aspects of field experiences. The current field of research focuses on the impact of field experiences on teaching, not on the impact of field on the decisions related to becoming a special education teacher. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the relationship between pre-service teachers' field experiences and the factors that impact their decisions related to obtaining a special education certification.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Legal Obligations

Senate Bill (SB) 174, passed by the 81st Texas Legislature in 2009, mandated that the State Board of Educator Certification (SBEC) provide information regarding the extent to which teacher education programs prepared special education and general teachers to effectively teach students with disabilities (Texas Senate, 2009).

SBEC encouraged colleges and universities to incorporate special education preparation into all teacher training programs. With the passing of Senate Bill 174, the accreditation of teacher preparation programs in Texas were directly linked with the ability to train pre-service teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities, impacting the design and delivery of education courses across the State.

In addition to the changes brought about by Senate Bill 174, the increase of students with disabilities being included in regular education settings required that all teachers know how to properly teach students with disabilities as described in the *Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)* of 2004. Specifically the law provides that, to the maximum extent possible, children with disabilities in public or private institutions or other care facilities be educated with children without disabilities. In addition, special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1412). This may account for the prediction of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) that employment of special-education teachers may increase significantly, by as much as 17 percent from 2010 to 2020.

2.2 Highly Qualified

In 2004, IDEA required that all public elementary and secondary special education teachers be "highly qualified" as special education teachers. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2007), "Ensuring that every child is taught by a highly qualified teacher is a central feature of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*, the most recent reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA)*" (para.1). The Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2012) reported that in order to become "highly qualified" in special education, any teacher who holds a valid Texas classroom teaching certificate may take the Special Education Supplemental test to become certified as an entry-level special education teacher. Many school districts, therefore, are encouraging general education teachers to become certified in special education to ensure that within the general education setting, students with disabilities are being taught by a "highly qualified" special education teacher.

2.3 Field Experiences

Field experiences are a necessary and beneficial component of teacher education programs. Research has shown that systematically and supervised field experiences have positively affected the knowledge and skills of both special and general education teachers (O'Brien, Stoner, Appel, & House, 2007; Sears, Cavallaro, & Hall, 2004; Whitney, Golez, Nagel, & Nieto, 2002).

Extended field experiences have afforded additional opportunities for university students to raise questions about current practices and to further explore teaching and learning strategies while applying them to real-life situations (Prater & Sileo, 2002).

According to Hodge and Jansma (1997), courses with practicum experiences have a greater impact on student attitudes than coursework alone. Hanline (2010) posited that effective special education field experiences should center on three areas for construction of knowledge: (1) different instructional practices, (2) practical experiences and (3) experience within inclusive settings. In addition to the need to understand content and effective instruction for student learning, pre-service special educators need a deeper understanding specifically of the special education referral process (Morewood & Condo, 2012).

3. Methods of the Study

3.1 Methodology

This study is best described as a qualitative *case study* "because it draws attention to the question of what can be learned from a single case" (Stake, 2000, p. 435). This case study of a single cohort of pre-service teachers is a unique and specific object of study. At the same time, it is considered an instrumental case study since its aim is to provide insight into the role of field experiences on pre-service teaching and their decision-making related to obtaining a special education certification.

3.2 Context

During the period that a Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) Inquiry Brief Proposal was being developed, initial discussions regarding changes to the Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies (BSIS) teacher education program took place in the College of Education at one four-year university in Northeastern Texas. These discussions centered on the Senate Bill 174 accountability system for educator preparation (ASEP). The purpose of the ASEP "is to assure that each educator preparation program (EPP) is held accountable for the readiness for certification of candidates completing the programs" (TEA, 2011, para. 1).

The University's early childhood through sixth (EC-6) teacher certification program was divided into four phases which included both general and special education courses in addition to field experiences. Across the EC-6 education program, special education coursework was expanded and strengthened through program revisions. Prior to the curriculum changes, students in the program were only required to complete one special education course. The new program was supposed to require students to complete two special education courses: one introductory special education course and a course on severe and profound disabilities. In addition, the students were to have special education components in three additional courses: behavior and classroom management, assessment, and a tutoring course. Because of intellectual freedom, the courses with special education components vary in the amount and depth of the special education content included depending on the faculty member responsible for the course.

In their penultimate semester, students had two full days of field experience with placements in both general and special education settings. Placements were made by the university clinical experiences coordinator and the school principals. The goal was for every student to have several weeks in a special education classroom. In many cases, the schools were unable to accommodate the placement of pre-service teachers in the special education classes or were only able to allow them into the special education classes for a very limited experience.

In a preliminary attempt to discover if the addition of special education field experiences impacted the perceptions of pre-service teachers, two primary research questions were explored:

1. Did field impact the students' decision to take the special education certification exam?
2. Are students more confident working with children with disabilities after field experiences?

3.3 Participants

The 55 participants in this case study were all students in the next to last semester of the university's EC-6 teacher certification program, pursuing their BSIS degree. In total, 233 pre-service teachers were in the EC-6 certification program. The participants, whose ages ranged from their twenties to sixties, included 54 females and 1 male. The demographic makeup of the student participants included 41 Caucasians, 11 Hispanics, and 3 African Americans.

3.4 Instrument

This case study utilized a qualitative, pre-structured survey. "In the pre-structured survey, some main topics, dimensions and categories are defined beforehand and the identification of these matters in the research units is guided by a structured protocol for questioning or observation" (Jansen, 2010, p. 4). The survey consisted of 4 open-ended questions:

1. Did your field include placement in a special education classroom or working with students with disabilities? Please explain/describe your field experience.
2. How did field (or not having field) impact your decision regarding taking the special education certification exam? Explain.
3. Do you feel more confident about working with children with disabilities than at the beginning of the semester? Explain.
4. What concerns do you have about working with children with disabilities? What could be done to reduce your concerns?

This survey was designed to facilitate the understanding of the decision making characteristics of pre-service teachers related to special education certification.

3.5 Procedures

The survey was conducted in December, 2012. Participants completed an informed consent that explained that participation was voluntary. The study was conducted with the approval of the university's Institutional Review Board. Participants were informed that they would not receive any compensation for completing the survey and that it would not impact their grade. The electronic survey was completed via a course management system individually over a one week period. The data was downloaded into a spreadsheet with identifiers being removed.

3.6 Data Analysis

In order to understand the participants' decision making related to certification, the researchers closely attended to the manner in which participants expressed their views. A constant comparative data analysis was used to uncover embedded data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each unit of data was coded individually by the researchers to gain familiarity with the data (Ruona, 2005), then compared to the other units of data to determine the patterns and categories that emerged (Merriam, 2009). Codes were then examined and categories constructed to form broader themes.

Because of the constructivist nature of qualitative research, trustworthiness applies to the rigor of the interpretation of the research "...for framing and bounding an interpretive study itself" (Lincoln and Guba, 2000, p. 179). To promote trustworthiness, the research team took a number of opportunities to discuss and share codes that emerged in their analysis, reaching consensus on the themes and categories.

Using multiple researchers to analyze the data builds trustworthiness (Merriam, 2009) and should be used as a means of triangulating the data when it is not possible to conduct member checks (Denzin, 1978). In this study, because all identifiers were removed, it was not possible to conduct member checks by verifying data with the original participants. Also, audit trails were employed as a strategy to enhance the trustworthiness of the study and included collecting raw data, analysis products, team meeting evidence, and process notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.7 Limitations

One area of concern in this study was respondent behavior. "The respondent may deliberately try to please the interviewer or to prevent the interviewer from learning something about the respondent" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p.650). In order to prevent respondent behavior, students were informed that all responses would be anonymous and that responses would not be reviewed until grades for the semester were submitted. The advantage of conducting a qualitative written survey over an oral survey is that participants do not feel time constraints or pressure, which was important given the potential power relationship between faculty members as researchers and the pre-service teachers as students. Conversely, participants in a written interview do not have the freedom to ask for clarification of questions.

A second limitation of the study was that the only participants were from one cohort of pre-service teachers from one regional university. Further research with other cohorts and from other education programs would add to the body of knowledge about the role of field experiences on the decision making process of pre-service teachers related to certification.

4. Findings

In regards to RQ1, *Did field impact the students' decision to take the special education certification exam*, five main themes emerged: employment, personal needs, time, teacher, and the classroom experience. Each theme will be discussed further utilizing selected student excerpts supported by relevant literature.

4.1 Impact of Field

4.1.1 Employment

There is a continued demand for teachers who have the skills necessary to meet the rising number of special education students (Billingsley & McCleskey, 2004). In order to alleviate this epic shortage, Nance-Nash (2009) stated that signing bonuses and higher starting salaries have become part of the recruitment package in many districts. As a result, special education teachers have excellent employment opportunities.

Not surprisingly, the data showed that 11 of the 55 pre-service teachers stated that special education certification would make them more marketable (see Table 1). The students noted that their field placement impacted the decision to seek special education certification. The numerous special education opening in the job market, however, did not appear to sway their decision.

Table 1: Impact of Field upon Beliefs about Employment

	Selected participant data excerpts
Impact not due to field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I don’t think [field] did either way; I know how important it is to have these skills and I want to be more employable”. • By taking the special education certification test, I will know what I need to do to help that child success academically... I will also look good when I am applying for jobs” • “I have always wanted to be certified... not only will it be a possible job selection... but it will also be a benefit to me as a teacher” • “I will not be taking the special education certification exam... I feel like if my heart is not 100% into teaching special needs, I do not need to have that underneath my belt”. • “I actually really liked the life skills classroom... Overall this experience during this phase is making me think about getting my certification for special education”.
Impact based upon field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Before field, I planned on taking the special education test just as a backup to have more certifications and qualifications—after field, I don’t know if I am going to do that”. • “[Field] definitely confirmed that I do not want to be a life skills teacher... I’m still debating on taking the test though because I think it would be nice to have more certifications just in case”. • “I really think that it is a great certification to have and I think it can really make a difference in your teaching career... [However], special education is not for me”. • “I loved the resource room, although I knew right away that life-skills was not for me... I want to be certified to be marketable”. • “Before field, I planned on taking the special education test just as back up and to have more certification qualifications... After field, I don’t know if I am going to do that”.

4.1.2 Self-Actualization

In addition to becoming more marketable, the data revealed that several students believed the special education certification would provide the specialized knowledge and skills necessary to work with a diverse group of students (see Table 1). For example, one student remarked, “I feel it is a great benefit... not only will it be a possible job selection... but will also be a benefit to me as a teacher because I will be in contact with numerous students with a variety of problems.” Another student wrote: I want to be certified to be marketable but also because my brother is dyslexic and I want to be able to help students like my brother... I saw him cry over homework; I saw him feel stupid and not good enough... I want to be certified so that I can make sure no student ever has to feel like that again.

These students echo the research that indicated that personal experiences impact a person’s decisions about going into special education (Hausstätter, 2007). Other students believed teaching special education was a matter of one’s heart. “I have a special place in my heart for special needs individuals,” stated one student, “and I have no hesitations in getting certified and working in that environment.” Another student asserted, “Field made me realize that there is so much that goes into teaching special education... there has to be something in your heart telling you to be a teacher and I believe the same goes for teaching special education.”

4.2 The Classroom Experience

Three of the most frequent reasons for pursuing the special education certification were the amount of time in the classroom, the supervising teacher, and the classroom environment.

4.2.1 Time in the Classroom

Time in the classroom was noted as one of the most important factors influencing pre-service teachers to pursue certification in special education.

Although the new course requirements required students to spend time observing and teaching in special education classrooms, the amount of time varied for each student and at each assigned campus. Research indicated that “special educators who have less than 10 weeks of pre-service student teaching are at a much greater risk of leaving” the field of special education than their counterparts who had longer levels of experienced in special education (Connelly, & Graham, 2009, p. 9).

The research, however, does not indicate the importance of extended time on the students’ decisions related to certification. Students’ time in the field ranged from no field placement to just a few hours during the semester as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Impact of Time upon Certification

Time	Selected participant data excerpts
No Field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Taking the special education certification is not high on my priority list. I was not in field; however, it isn’t part of this decision”. • “My concerns are actually how to work with them due to the fact that I have not had the opportunity to do so”.
Field (one day or less)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I observed once in a special education classroom”. • “I observed once in a special education class... I thought it was beneficial to be in the class and be around that sort of environment”.
Field (one week or less)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I was in a life skill class for one week and a resource class for one week” • “I went to a special education classroom for two days” • “I feel like they should allow you to observe and teach longer than just two days. I would have benefited from at least four classes of teaching and being with that class”. • “Working with the students for those two days was so rewarding! I felt like I was actually doing something”. • “I loved working in the life skills room! Just those two days made me want to work in SpEd”.

4.2.2 The Teacher

According to studies conducted by Haberman and Post (1992), pre-service teachers noted that having a mentor teacher actively coach them was the most effective way to learn effective classroom procedures. The data revealed that when students were placed in classrooms where the cooperating teacher was ill-prepared or portrayed a negative attitude, their desire to take the special education exam diminished. One student stated, “I did not however like working in the special needs class... I felt like if I had a better experience with [the classroom teacher], I would possibly want to go into special needs.” Another student noted, “Having field pretty much scared me about taking the special education certification exam because my teacher told me horror stories about when she was a special education teacher.”

A different student reported that she had “to work with a teacher who believes completely opposite from me.”

Students who had a positive experience with their cooperating teachers were more influenced to take the exam. For instance, one student remarked that a college instructor had been influential on their decision to take the exam: [My instructor] “has been a wonderful professor this semester, and he has really opened my eyes to a passion I never knew I had.” Another student stated, “I have had amazing teachers and aides to learn from and I am grateful for that... I have never had a bad day in special ed. and that concerns me because I know it is not always going to be a bed of roses.”

Whitaker (2000) found that new special education teachers who were assigned a special education mentor teacher had more confidence and planned to remain in teaching.

4.2.3 The Classroom Environment

Loreman, Deppeler and Harvey (2005) suggested that teachers must not only have positive attitudes, but must reflect upon their own views and biases when it comes to disability and inclusion. In this study, the data revealed diverse attitudes in regards to how teaching in a special education setting influenced a student's desire to take the certification exam. For many of the pre-service teachers, teaching in classrooms comprised of children with a range of disabilities, conveyed feelings of trepidation. One student wrote, "I was pretty sure before going to field that I did not want to take the special ed. certification exam. However, field just reinforced my feelings. I would love to be a resource teacher. However, I am afraid that I would get stuck in a special ed. [life skills] classroom. I do not want to take the special ed. certification test because I am not cut out for that type of work."

Another student confirmed the perception that being more marketable is not always viewed as positive: "I was in the life skills room and I do not want to get transferred into a classroom like that... I do not want the school to have a reason to make me teach special ed." A third student responded that field "helped me notice that special education is just not for me. I like helping the children but I don't think I could do it the rest of my life."

For other pre-service teachers, the initial experience of being placed into a classroom with special education students actually increased their desire to take the certification exam. One student remarked, "I really enjoyed being in the special education classes... I like helping students one on one. So field really made me start thinking about taking the test". Another student noted, "I was so worried about working with students with disabilities. When I went into the classroom the first time, I fell in love... I will for sure take the certification test." According to Graham, Hopple, Manross, and Sitzman (1993), "There is simply no substitute for spending time with real children, in real schools, with real teachers" (p. 212).

RQ2. Are students more confident working with children with disabilities after field?

The more time someone spends with an individual with a disability, the better their attitudes are (Hunt & Hunt, 2000). Carroll, Forlin, and Jobling (2003) found that pre-service teachers experienced less discomfort working with students with disabilities when given sufficient time to overcome their pre-conceptions and fears.

4.3 Confidence

The case study showed mixed results with regards to students' confidence in working with children with disabilities after field. These wide-ranging findings appear challenging in light of the requirements to place every pre-service student in a special education classroom. Fear, a student's disability, lack of knowledge, the classroom environment, and teacher workload were common themes that resonated throughout the research findings.

4.3.1 Fear

As indicated earlier in the findings, the lack of time pre-service teachers spent in field impacted their confidence level. For example, one student stated, "I was really nervous going into the classroom but after I was there, I had seen that it was not that bad." Another student echoed the emotion: "I was so worried about working with students with disabilities... when I went into the classroom for the first time, I fell in love." One student noted that being "comfortable and confident are two different things." In that, the participant noted, "I don't think I will ever feel completely comfortable teaching students with special needs, the way I wish I could. I admit, the more time I spend with them the more comfortable, I get working with them."

Leko (2012) found that pre-service teachers who did not have enough time in special education classrooms did not develop a strong sense of self-efficacy, or belief in their abilities, which can be impact their fears. This was reflected by other students' beliefs. One student stated, "I guess all I need is more time in the classroom." Overall, the data revealed that pre-service teachers with more time in the field classroom had increased skill and comfort levels when working with students with disabilities.

A student's diagnosed disability appeared to play a major role in the confidence of the pre-service teachers. Some students were concerned with the health of the individual with the disability, while other students were fearful of their personal space, having too much empathy, and violent classroom behaviors (see Table 3).

Table 3: Impact of Fear upon Student Confidence

Fears	Selected participant data excerpts
Disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "A lot of students with special needs have medical problems and I need to know what to do—to help that child". • "My major concern would be something happening to them and not knowing how to handle the situation".
Personal Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I just did not enjoy the students constantly touching me and invading my personal space... I am not cut out for that type of work".
Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "After being in the special education room, I do not feel cut out to teach students with severe disabilities... I would just feel sorry and sad for them all the time".
Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "My biggest concern is not being physically strong enough to pick up, restrain, or support a student. If a student really violent or out of control (which could happen in any classroom environment), I would need to work on showing rear for the safety of everyone in there". • "What do you do when the students start getting violent...? I had seen one of the students kick the teacher". • "I have concerns about their behavior and them trying to hit me". • "I don't feel that much more confident because what I saw was more like babysitting and it makes me nervous when they have their fits". • "I'm scared that they are going to have a fit and hurt me or other students".
Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I feel like it would be a very stressful and busy job day in and day out".

4.3.1 Knowledge

Data revealed that several of the students believed that they lacked the knowledge to teach students with disabilities. Other students had concerns about not understanding the paperwork required of special educators (see Table 4). The findings were consistent with Jobi and Moni's (2004) research, in that, the pre-service teachers felt that there needed to be a greater emphasis on developing knowledge and strategies for teaching students with disabilities in their teacher education program.

Table 4: Lack of Knowledge Related to Confidence

Knowledge	Selected participant data excerpts
Lack of Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Undergoing an extensive training would probably be the only thing that would ease my thoughts on this program". • "No one is ever really confident in working with special needs... if they were comfortable then, they wouldn't care about their students... special needs students have to have instruction tailored to them, no amount of preparation can prepare someone for the unknown". • "In having so many state demands for the STARR ALT as well as curriculum paperwork, ARD meetings, and writing IEP's... I feel unprepared in my knowledge in my knowledge of how to go about correctly writing and submitting this paperwork". • "At the beginning of the semester, I was so afraid of not knowing what to do or if I was implementing the lesson correctly". • "My concern is not being trained enough. I know that not all the students will have the same disability, but it will be so important to help the student learn and not harm the other students during the learning process".

4.3.2 Teachers

According to Fives, Hamman & Olivarez (2007), supervising teachers are often portrayed as having influence on student teachers. Influences from the supervising teacher were evident in this study. One student remarked that the supervising teacher helped in building confidence by noting, "My supervisor also told me that I worked well with small groups and that I would be good as a special education teacher." Another student noted, "I absolutely loved everything about my placement in field from my supervisor, mentor teacher, placement, and the school... I hope to have just as good, or a better, experience next semester."

The data revealed that confidence was built as students watched their mentors make accommodations and modifications for students. One participant remarked, "Being in that classroom showed me ways that the teacher accommodated for the students' different needs." Working in field was wonderful because I saw everything we talked about in [the college] class being applied on real students." Another student noted that the classroom experience helped in the area of classroom management: "my mentor teacher truly helped me a lot and guided me every step of the way... I can tell... I had more confidence and better classroom management."

The mentorship of the university professor also appeared to impact the pre-service teachers' classroom teaching experiences. One student explained, "I had the experience to have a [university] instructor that trained us not to feel sorry for students that have disabilities." The results of this study support the supposition that supervising and cooperating teachers appear to provide pre-service teachers with the confidence needed to apply lessons learned in the university classroom to real-life settings

5. Implications and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between field experiences and pre-service educator's decisions related to obtaining a special education certification. Darling-Hammond (2006) theorized that the most powerful teacher education programs require pre-service educators to spend extensive time in field settings, allowing students to examine and apply concepts and strategies they are learning alongside teachers who can show them how to teach in ways that are responsive to learner needs. In this case study, the student reflections revealed that it is the teacher and the amount of time working in the special education classroom which directly impacts the pre-service educator's perception of teaching in a special education setting.

Furthermore, as highlighted in the study, the lack of interaction with students and staff may adversely impact a student's decision to seek special education certification. For this reason, we recommend purposeful placement of students with teachers. Teachers who are well-prepared with quality lessons, accommodations and supports, and who actively include the pre-service educator in understanding an IEP may increase the desire for the student to seek certification as a special education teacher. The findings of this study also indicated that pre-service students spent a disproportionate percentage of time in special education classrooms.

Increasing the amount of time spent in special education classrooms should be a priority in order to build student confidence in working with children with disabilities.

Another implication from the study centers on the pre-service educators fear of working with children with disabilities, especially those who display violent or externalizing behaviors. While many pre-service programs provide classroom management courses, few focus on positive behavioral supports. According to Polirstok and Gottlie (2006), "Pre-service teacher education programs especially in the elementary grades must recognize the importance of training teachers in positive behavior intervention techniques as a way to maximize student social and academic learning" (p. 354). Thus, the inclusion of positive behavioral support training coupled with training focused on crisis prevention and intervention needs would provide the additional supports needed to prepare future special educators to appropriately handle emerging behavioral issues with confidence.

It is important to recognize that one of the difficulties in this study was the lack of field experiences for the pre-service students. To overcome this barrier, service projects can be incorporated into university coursework. Special projects such as working with the Special Olympics program may help to build confidence and reduce the fear of children with disabilities. Novak, et.al. (2009) found that even brief service learning projects enhanced pre-service teachers' confidence and self-efficacy about working with children with disabilities.

A lack of instructional strategies specific to a student's disability is another finding of the study. Some respondents recognized a need for there to be greater emphasis on strategies for teaching students with disabilities. Such instruction should be disability specific. For example, teaching pre-service educators to use a task analysis for students with intellectual disabilities would be considered a disability specific strategy. Therefore, teacher preparation programs need to better prepare teacher candidates to utilize instructional strategies which differentiate the curriculum based upon the needs' of the student.

This study also revealed that pre-service teachers lack confidence in the ability to complete IEP paperwork and participate in IEP meetings.

It is our recommendation, that teacher preparation programs create opportunities, as part of their seminal coursework, for pre-service educators to participate in IEP writing activities utilizing state standards. According to Duffy and Forgan (2005), it is imperative that recent graduates of teacher preparation programs understand special education vocabulary and have the knowledge to write IEPs. Additionally, simulated IEP meetings can be instrumental in assisting students in understanding the process involved in developing an IEP. Through role-play, students can understand the unique perspectives of each member of the IEP team and member's role in IEP development.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that students who have extensive time in a field placement with a positive role model and who receive appropriate instruction in academic and behavioral strategies are more likely to seek special education certification.

These findings can assist teacher programs in designing coursework and field experiences which will encourage more students to enter the field of special education thereby decreasing the ever-growing shortage of special education teachers nationwide. Future studies need to be designed to longitudinally examine whether teacher candidates, who have had adequate preparation experiences including time, positive role models, and specific disability strategies, remain in the special education field.

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