Pre-Service Teachers’ Perceptions of Students with Learning Disabilities: Using Mixed Methods to Examine Effectiveness of Special Education Coursework

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As the number of K-12 students with learning disabilities educated in general education classrooms grow, it is essential to examine the preparation and perceptions of pre-service teachers (N=15) who will educate students with learning disabilities. Within the context of an undergraduate learning disabilities method course, this study examined how pre-service teachers perceived students with learning disabilities as well as the effectiveness of particular course experiences, including fieldwork with students with learning disabilities, video vignettes, lesson planning, assigned reading, and center-based instruction, in shifting perceptions. Using a convergent, mixed method design, teacher educators at a university in the northeast used surveys, journals, and focus groups to examine pre-service teachers’ perceptions over time. Both quantitative and qualitative data indicate perceptions shifted positively in response to the methods course. Reflections and suggestions for other teacher educators are offered. Keywords: Teacher Education, Learning Disabilities, Perceptions, Pre-Service Teachers, Special Education

Since learning disability (LD) is the largest federal disability category (IDEA, 2004), it is highly likely that pre-service teachers (PSTs) will encounter students with LDs when they enter the profession. If teachers’ perceptions towards students with LDs directly impact students’ outcomes (Good & Brophy, 2007; Woodcock, 2010), it is essential for PSTs to examine their perceptions of students with LDs prior to their work in the field. Teacher education programs can serve as a dynamic space where both PSTs and teacher educators engage in classroom research, in an effort to combine the scholarship of teaching and learning. In doing so, PSTs and teacher educators can examine PSTs’ perceptions and how these perceptions can impact the education of students with LDs. Further, this context provides essential feedback for teacher educators as they create and revise teacher preparation programs.

Relevant Research

In the last 20 years, researchers (i.e., Aldrich, 2000; Berry, 2010; Bowlin, 2012) have examined both in-service teachers’ and PSTs’ attitudes about inclusive education. Some have explored teachers’ perceptions and attitudes toward students with disabilities in general. Others have focused their research on teachers’ perceptions and attitudes toward students with specific types of disabilities. Few studies have explored PSTs’ perceptions and attitudes towards students with LDs.